The Magical Revolution of the Reincarnated Princess and the Genius Young Lady
6
Piero Karasu
Illustration by
Yuri Kisaragi

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"Forgive me for dropping in like this. I'm looking for my quarry. She's very important to me."
"Spirit Substantiation!"
"Aerial System: Dragon Heart!"

“Will you spend this unknowable future with me?”
“I will. I’ll stay by your side until I can’t go on anymore, and then we’ll choose our end together.”

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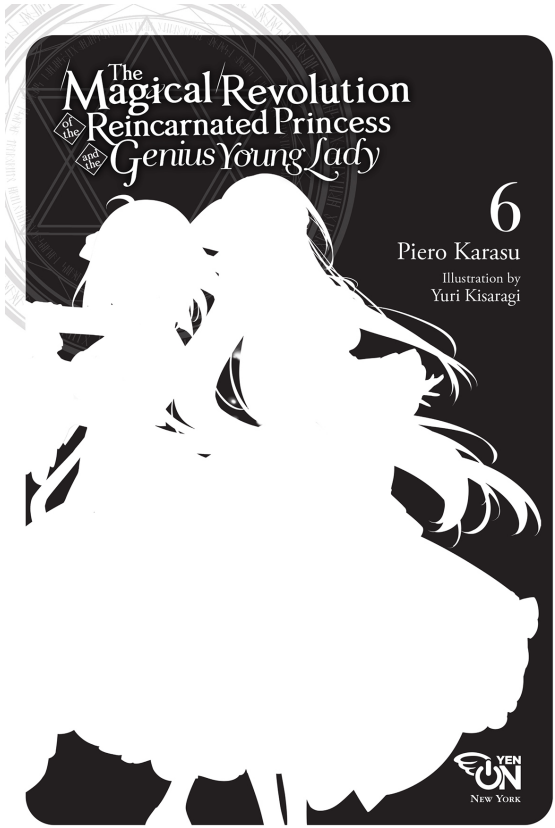
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YEN ON
New York

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TENSEI OJO TO TENSAI REIJO NO MAHO KAKUMEI Vol.6
© Piero Karasu, Yuri Kisaragi 2023
First published in Japan in 2023 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo. English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo through TUTTLE-MORI AGENCY, INC., Tokyo.

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New York, NY 10001

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First Yen On Edition: March 2024
Edited by Carly Smith & Yen On Editorial: Anna Powers
Designed by Yen Press Design: Wendy Chan

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Karasu, Piero, author. | Kisaragi, Yuri, illustrator. | Trowell, Haydn, translator.
Title: The magical revolution of the reincarnated princess and the genius young lady / Piero Karasu ; illustration by Yuri Kisaragi ; translation by Haydn Trowell.
Other titles: Tensei ojo to tensai reijo no maho kakumei. English
Description: First Yen On edition. | New York, NY : Yen On, 2022.
Identifiers: LCCN 2021060085 | ISBN 9781975337803 (v. 1 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975337827 (v. 2 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975337841 (v. 3 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975351656 (v. 4 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975369033 (v. 5 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975380496 (v. 6 ; trade paperback)
Subjects: CYAC: Magic—Fiction. | Princesses—Fiction. | Reincarnation—Fiction. | LCGFT: Fantasy. | Light novels.
Classification: LCC PZ7.1.K3626 Mag 2022 | DDC [Fic]—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2021060085

ISBNs: 978-1-9753-8049-6 (paperback)
978-1-9753-8050-2 (ebook)

E3-20240226-JV-NF-ORI

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The Magical Revolution of the Reincarnated Princess and the Genius Young Lady 6

The Story So Far

Princess Anisphia yearns for magic and yet cannot use it. After rescuing the gifted prodigy Euphyllia from the commotion of her annulled betrothal, the two young ladies set out on new beginnings. With Euphyllia having acceded to the throne as queen, Anis is free to focus on her research. Meanwhile, Euphyllia arranges a birthday celebration for Anis in which new technologies are used to physically manifest spirits, leading to a reconciliation with the Ministry of the Arcane. Anis finally manages to reunite with her brother, banished to the frontier—when what should turn up but a vampire?!

Characters

Ilia Coral
Anisphia's personal maid.

Lainie Cyan
Was at the heart of the incident in which Euphyllia's betrothal was called off. In reality a vampire and now a maid at the detached palace.

Algard Von Palettia
Anis's younger brother. Presently exiled to the frontier.

Acryl
A Lycant who wandered into Algard's frontier territory .

Tilty Claret
Daughter of a marquis, and a researcher of curses.

Orphans Il Palettia
Previous king of the Kingdom of Palettia. Anis's father.

Sylphine Maise Palettia
Former queen and Anis's mother.

Gark Lampe
One of Anisphia's research assistants.
An apprentice at the Royal Guard.

The Story So Far

Piero Karasu
Illustration by Yuri Kisaragi

“Are you really going to leave us?” I asked, my voice betraying more frustration than I had intended.

Staring back at me was a beautiful woman with black hair and bright red eyes.

Her familiar smile—cool yet mysterious, hiding her true depths—only upset me more.

“But it’s so boring here,” she answered.

“I know you can be eccentric at times…but really?”

“Yep. Oh? Are you worried about me?”

“I never said that! I’m just glad to be able to finally remove myself from this rotten relationship!”

“Oh dear. Do you hate me?”

“…Hey. Why *are* you going, though? You’ll regret it, you know. One slipup, and someone will kill you. And if they come after you, not even you will be able to—”

“So you *are* worried about me.”

“No, I’m not! What is your problem?! Ugh, you get on my nerves!”

This conversation was doing nothing to calm my anger, and I found myself stomping my feet in frustration. That didn’t help at all, either.

“Fine!” I shouted back. “It’s clear you don’t understand how I feel! If I’m seen talking to you, people will suspect me too! Just go!”

“Ruella.” Tiris whispered my name.

She was my best friend, my hardworking rival, and the one person who I could never fully comprehend.

“I don’t understand it,” she said. “The value of what our clan has been pursuing.”

“…It’s *eternity*. Do I have to explain again?”

“Is eternity really so great, though? I’m not so sure.”

“It’s what our ancestors set out to attain. Don’t you want to help finally realize their dreams?”

“And then what?”

“What do you mean…?”

“I’ve given this serious thought. I’ve racked my brain over and over to see the appeal—but it’s just so *boring*. I don’t need eternity. So what if it’s what the clan wants? I want to learn about other things. Like the meaning of life, and how I ought to be living it.”

“Ugh… I hope we never have to put up with another heretic like you again.”

“I’m sorry for always causing you so many headaches. Thanks for coming to see me off.”

“I was just passing by! I came here on a whim, that’s all! Why don’t you just go already?! Just do whatever you like!”

I knew it in my heart—our rotten relationship, our long years together, had been brought to an abrupt close.

Without losing her smile, she finally asked:

“Ruella, what comes after eternity? I’ve been asking myself that question for so long now. And I can’t think of anything.”

Those were the last words exchanged between us.

It was our destiny as vampires to seek eternal life. Where would Tiris go now if she was to abandon that mission?

Perhaps the reason her words reverberated with me so profoundly was because in truth, I wanted to know the answer to that question, too.

CHAPTER 1
Lunie's Wish

Three months had already passed since Euphie and I had traveled to the eastern edge of the Kingdom of Palettia.

Following our royal tour, the kingdom entered the rainy season, three months of the year with nearly nonstop rain.

The months were named after the six different spiritual attributes—light, fire, wind, earth water, and darkness, in that order—with each attribute having upper and lower phases, for a total of twelve.

The rainy season began in the month of Upper Water, continuing through Lower Water and into Upper Darkness.

We were currently approaching the end of the last month, and while the rainy season was supposed to be reaching its end before long, it was still pouring outside.

"So much for the rainy season being over soon. It's really coming down," I muttered, staring out the window.

"It's really coming down," Euphie said.

"The capital sure is quiet this time of year…"

"Lots of nobles return to their lands to help prepare for natural disasters, so it isn't surprising how empty the capital can feel."

"Yeah, rain is a blessing and all, but it's also a huge pain. You have to be more careful than usual when hunting monsters, and it's hard to push deeper into the hunting grounds."

It wasn't easy working outside in the inclement weather. But plenty of monsters felt at home in the rain, so the kingdom's adventurers had their work cut out for them. And it wasn't just adventurers who had cause to worry. Nobles in the royal capital had to return to their holdings to be ready should the worst come.

This all meant that there were fewer people in the city this time of year, so those who remained ended up with too much time on their hands. But we still couldn't afford to let our guards down. It really was the worst season of the year.

"I'm glad we were able to go on our trip before all this," I remarked.

"Indeed. It wouldn't have been possible without the Airdra and

the Airbikes," Euphie answered.

"You know, people often talk behind your back when you work too much during the month of Upper Darkness. Stillness and rest are the domain of dark spirits, right? So, pushing yourself too hard is blasphemy!"

"Yes, I know what they say, but this month is also the time to take stock at the conclusion of the rainy season, so people *are* busy. It's only during Lower Darkness that they can really take a break."

"Things will probably be a lot more hectic next year…"

Euphie appeared by my side with a soft, mischievous smile. "How about we focus more on the time we have here and now, together? Anis?"

Then she placed a hand on my cheek before delivering a light kiss.

I closed my eyes to accept the gesture, until I realized Euphie was staring back strangely.

"What's with that face, Euphie?"

"No. I'm glad to see you're accepting my overtures…but to be honest, I liked the way you used to get so awkward and embarrassed."

"Heh-heh-heh. When it comes to acting brazen, I've learned from the best."

This time I reached out to kiss Euphie in turn, prompting her to respond with an impish grin.

We reached out to each other again, pressing our foreheads together, then our cheeks. It was chillier than usual during the rainy season, so Euphie's body heat was a real delight.

While the two of us were glued to each other, there came a knock at the door, followed by Ilia's voice: "Lady Anisphia, Lady Euphyllia. Your guests have arrived in the workshop."

"…Already? Thank you, Ilia. We'll be there right away. Euphie? Let's go."

"Yes, I suppose we should."

I hated that our time together had been interrupted, but I left the room by Euphie's side as we made our way to the workshop in the detached palace.

There, we found a group of familiar faces waiting for us, each of them passing the time in their own way.

"…Morning, Anis, Euphyllia. You're both as vibrant as ever despite all this rain, I see."

"Good morning, Tilty. And just like in every other rainy season, you're even *gloomier* than usual."

Indeed, Tilty looked considerably more listless than she typically did, no doubt on account of the weather. I flashed her a smile before turning to our other guests.

In addition to Tilty, the other members of our circle since our inspection tour—Halphys, Garkie, and Navre—were also present.

"Good morning, everyone," I said.

"Yes, good morning, Lady Anis," Halphys answered in her usual tone of voice.

"Morning," Garkie said, sounding almost broken.

"…Yeah, good morning. Your Majesty, Queen Euphyllia. Your Highness, Princess Anisphia," Navre added. The excessive greeting seemed to be an attempt to make up for Garkie's brief response.

I was amused by this wide range of reactions, then turned my attention to the last person in the room. "Good morning, Lainie. How are you today?"

"Good morning, Lady Anis. I'm no different than usual," she replied with a gentle smile.

My four guests had each been helping me verify a project that had occupied my time during the rainy season.

With greetings out of the way, Tilty wasted no time getting everyone's attention with a clap of her hands. "Now then, let's get down to business."

"You're always in such a hurry, Tilty," I remarked.

“I just don’t like wasting time.”

Not that we objected to her moving the conversation along.

Nearly three months had passed since we had begun this project together. In the meantime, everyone here had learned exactly what kind of person Tilty was.

“Thanks to all these examinations, I think we’re about ready to draw some conclusions about vampire abilities,” she began, the others nodding along in apprehension.

And why were we looking into the nature of vampires? Because we had decided that it was necessary to confirm the information that we had received during our trip to the kingdom’s eastern regions.

We had heard a great deal from Allie, whom we had met near the end of the tour, and the Lycant—a wolf beastfolk—under his protection, Acryl.

“Let’s start at the beginning, just to make sure we don’t leave anything out,” Tilty began. “While you were all out inspecting the eastern provinces, you heard that other vampires besides Lainie and Algard exist. And apparently, there’s a high probability that they’ve been making moves in secret.”

“Specifically, that they’d enslaved Acryl,” Euphie interjected.

“Disturbing, frankly,” I said. “After hearing about it all, I figured we’d better establish countermeasures in case any vampires try to move against the kingdom.”

Tilty continued from there. “So, I gave Lainie a second, more thorough look over to test the limits of her charm ability, and to confirm just how much power vampires possess…”

Both she and I glanced Lainie’s way.

“Vampire powers seem to be a heck of a lot more potent than I first imagined,” Tilty concluded.

“Really…?”

“Uh-oh…”

These past few months had been hardest on Lainie, but I couldn’t read her expression now. Tilty’s myriad tests and examinations had been particularly arduous for her. Everything we’d learned would certainly prove useful, but it must have exhausted her.

“First of all, let’s talk about her physical abilities. We knew about her rapid regeneration powers ever since that mess with Algard, but her basic performance was remarkable, too.”

“There were physical changes as well, right?” I noted. “Like fangs and claws, useful for catching an opponent off guard.”

“She would make the perfect assassin, since she wouldn’t need to bring her own weapons,” Tilty remarked.

“I—I could never…”

“We know. Your personality isn’t suited to that kind of work,” I said half-jokingly.

Essentially, she could extend her claws and teeth—a feat far from the realm of human magic, and further proof that vampires should be classified as a type of monster.

Those fangs and claws were remarkably durable and would indeed make potent weapons. As Tilty had noted, a vampire assassin would be a considerable headache.

“But even setting aside her potential as an assassin, our tests show that Lainie has *very* high potential,” Navre began. “It’s almost frightening, to be honest.”

“N-Navre…,” Lainie murmured.

“I’ve been teaching her swordsmanship and self-defense over these past three months, and once she got the hang of it, she improved at an incredible rate. You wouldn’t believe she was practically a beginner.”

“That’s right,” Garkie added. “She was awkward at first, but really, she’s become such a natural.”

“You think so too, Gark…?”

“Yes. If you wish, I would be more than willing to recommend you to a knightly order,” Navre said.

“Yep. If you keep it up, I think you’ll do just fine,” Garkie added.

“Me? I—I can’t even begin to imagine myself as a knight…” Lainie shrank back at all this praise, her eyes darting every which way.

“I agree,” I interjected. “We just wanted to measure your physical abilities at first, but you really took to the lessons, like sand absorbing water.”

“You too, Lady Anis…?! Is that why Tilty made me practice using a sword?”

“And thanks to that training, you were able to hold your own against Navre and Garkie, right?”

“But I never wanted to…”

“Lainie’s talents aren’t only physical. Her use of magic is also

quite extraordinary," Halphys cut in, adjusting her glasses with one finger. "We've been reexamining her vampire magic and her use of spirit stones, and after trying a few different methods over the past couple of months, she really has become quite adept."

"This follows from our discussion about magic, right?" Tilty asked. "The magic used by nobles and the magic used by monsters may look much the same from the outside, but are in all likelihood quite different. So, you took that idea and ran with it for your tests?"

"Yes, that's exactly right," Halphys said. "The hypothesis still needs verifying, but I believe our results have brought us as close as possible to the truth—for the time being, at least."

"This goes back to the difference between spirit stones and magicite, right?" I asked. "The difference that separates humans from monsters, and monsters from other creatures that don't possess magicite?"

"Yes, you've told us your theories before, Anis," Tilty replied. "And I've read Halphys's thesis. Basically, mages use magic by *resonating* with spirits. Halphys, what you're saying is that monsters draw on magicite to *dominate* spirits, yes?"

"I believe so, yes."

"So, based on that hypothesis, you're suggesting that Lainie's magicite was incomplete, and that was why she couldn't wield magic well?" Tilty turned next to Lainie. "Which is why you mistakenly thought you weren't any good at magic, yes?"

"Y-you're probably right, Lady Tilty…," Lainie answered, still looking lost amid all the attention.

Adjusting her glasses once more, Halphys turned back to Lainie. "If she keeps applying herself, it wouldn't be beyond the realm of possibility for her to rival Queen Euphyllia in power one day."

"N-no, Lady Halphys… I've never… I've never wanted *that,* either…!"

"Lainie, humility is all well and good, but when you take it too far, it can sound pretentious," Halphys commented, a formidable sense of pressure lying behind her smile.

Lainie said nothing.

I had the sense her magic skills had grown significantly, too. Still, it sounded like it had been a rough time for her…

"In summary, over the past three months, Lainie has developed better swordsmanship than most people manage in a lifetime, and

she's improved at magic, too. At this rate, Lainie's probably good enough to face real-life battle," I noted.

"The problem with these tests is that we didn't have enough time to be as thorough as we'd have liked," Tilty added. "To be honest, though, I think any normal person would be jealous of these results."

"The other issue is that all these benefits seem to be brought about by her vampire magicite," Euphie remarked.

The rest of us all breathed deep sighs.

"The vampire magicite itself seems to have accumulated all kinds of experience," I concluded. "That's how Lainie was able to grow so rapidly."

"This will depend on how much we can extrapolate these findings to other vampires, but if they're all like this… No, I don't even want to imagine it," Tilty said with a bitter sigh.

I responded with a grave nod.

Yes, it was entirely possible that there would be individual differences among vampires. At least, I hoped Lainie was a special case.

"Capable of regenerating unless killed instantly, of protecting themselves by charming others, possessing unique abilities to infiltrate behind enemy lines, and to draw on prior battle experience inherited through their magicite…right?" I summarized.

"All that experience from the magicite meant that she was basically at the level of a full-fledged knight in no time at all. It's nothing short of astounding," Tilty remarked.

"We don't have a point of comparison, so it's hard to say for sure. But is Lainie an exceptional vampire, or a normal one? Everything hinges on the answer to that question," Euphie pointed out.

Tilty brushed her bangs out of her eyes, resting a hand against her forehead. "Really, it's a good thing the old king didn't decide to do away with Lainie and Algard after that engagement hubbub. A *very* good thing."

"I'm grateful too," I murmured. "I hate to think what we might end up facing if he did…"

The others all wore conflicted expressions. I guessed they felt the same way.

"I informed Algard of our results and asked him to verify them if possible…" Euphie trailed off there.

“It won’t be enough for a proper comparison, though,” Tilty interrupted. “First of all, there’s no telling whether Lainie awakened the proper way. Based on what we know now, I suppose our only option is to come up with real, concrete countermeasures.”

“I think we’ve confirmed as much as we can,” I noted. “We should probably take a break for now.”

After all, with the rainy season coming to an end, it was a good time to wrap things up. On top of that, I doubted that any more tests would reveal the true nature of the vampire race.

Our next move, then, would probably be to think of a way to actually fight them.

“With their abilities, vampires could cause all sorts of trouble. But the biggest risk is their power to influence people’s minds,” Tilty explained. “Two possible counterstrategies come to mind. The first is to make a magical tool designed to protect people from their charm ability. The second is an Impressed Seal, like what Anis has.”

As soon as Tilty mentioned it, all eyes turned to me. They all knew about the dragon magic tattooed into my back.

“We can look into new magic tools, but the Impressed Seal *does* have a proven track record,” Euphie remarked.

“But they can’t just be made from any old magicite, can they? And there’s no way we can give *everyone* a dragon-based seal. That just isn’t realistic.”

“Tilty’s right,” I said. “And I think I probably have a personal affinity with the dragon magicite. My gut tells me it won’t work for everyone.”

Euphie shook her head. “In any event, permanent markings like that are normally reserved for criminals. It would take people a long time to accept them culturally, so that’s one more reason it isn’t a realistic option.”

So basically, we had eliminated that option from our list.

“This might be impossible, but we should try to determine a way to use a magical tool…,” Tilty murmured.

“Can I ask you to help us with developing it?” Euphie asked her.

“No need. How could I resist such an *intriguing* offer?” Tilty returned with a laugh.

This was why she had been the first person I had turned to for investigating our vampire problem.

She had first been brought in to examine Lainie, but she was

also well-versed in magic and had an innate curiosity for all things related to curses and unknown phenomena. I knew I could rely on her.

"So basically, we're going to need to make artificial magicite capable of counteracting vampires' charm ability?" Tilty asked.

"Exactly," I answered. "Speaking of which, Lainie assisted on that front, too, didn't you?"

"Halphys was a great help, too. You're both so gifted."

"Me? Not at all…," the two of them said in unison, exchanging awkward glances.

I couldn't help laughing. Even Euphie was smiling, watching on with a warm look.

Lainie and Halphys both blushed, shrinking back a little.

* * *

After our discussion about vampire countermeasures, we each went our separate ways.

Later, during our usual chat after dinner at the detached palace, I realized that Lainie seemed preoccupied.

"Lainie? Is something the matter?" I ventured.

"…Ah, um, no! Sorry! It's nothing!" she answered in a hurry.

She seemed flustered, so I turned next to Euphie and Ilia—who both nodded in silent understanding.

"Hey, Lainie. If something is bothering you, you can share it with us," Euphie said gently.

"You can tell us anything, you know," Ilia added.

"She's right. So why don't you just come out with it?" I asked.

"…I think I understand now why everyone thought I was hiding something," Lainie muttered forlornly, almost as if she had given up. "There *is* something I'd like to discuss… I don't need long, but could I take a leave of absence for a short while?"

"Huh?" the three of us blurted out together. We stared back wide-eyed. The most upset among us was Ilia, the confusion plain on her face.

Euphie, on the other hand, narrowed her eyes. "…A leave of absence? In other words, you want to take some time away from the detached palace? Why?"

"I know this is selfish of me…but I want to find out more about

my mother."

"Your mother…?"

"Yes. She must have been a vampire, too. I know it won't be easy finding proof, but if she left anything behind, if there are any clues to go by…" She seemed truly desperate.

Meanwhile, I chastised myself. *How long had this been weighing on her? How could I not have noticed sooner?*

At that moment, Euphie breathed a soft sigh. "How do you mean to look into this, Lainie? You aren't thinking about going on this trip of yours alone, I hope?"

"…I—I…er…" She quickly averted her eyes.

At that moment, something seemed to break in Ilia as she fixed Lainie with a glare. Whoa, did it get really cold here all of a sudden?

"I mean, I'm better with magic now, and I can even wield a sword… And I thought if I use my vampire powers, even in secret, I might be able to travel without issue…" As she desperately tried to explain herself, her voice became smaller and smaller until it eventually trailed off.

At the same time, Euphie and Ilia grew even more intimidating.

Hey, Lainie? Even *I* think that sounds really reckless.

"W-well, I get it! The more you're capable of, the more you want to do everything yourself! You don't want to be selfish, right? You don't want to be a bother to anyone? Yes, I certainly understand that!" I said, trying to intervene.

"I hope you're saying that with a sense of contrition, Anis." Euphie glared at me.

"You would do well to learn some prudence as well, Lady Anisphia," Ilia added.

"Huh? Why are you both coming after me…?"

"You should take stock of your own misadventures."

Sheesh! The way they were both staring at me gave me the jitters. But I understood why they reacted that way. If I tried to make excuses for myself here, it would only upset them even more.

As I fell silent, Euphie and Ilia both turned back to Lainie.

"I'll overlook this, seeing as you haven't actually tried to leave yet," Euphie said. "But the idea of you setting out alone is unacceptable. You're still Anis's ward, are you not?"

"Ah! Th-that's true…," Lainie stammered.

Yes. I had pretty much forgotten about it, but Lainie was here

at the detached palace under my guardianship. I had gotten so used to the situation that it had slipped my mind.

"On top of that, while only a few people know the truth, the only reason you, a vampire, are allowed to move about freely is because Anis is monitoring you," Euphie continued. "I appreciate all you've done, Lainie, but this is something else entirely."

"Yes…"

"I can't agree to you leaving us like this. Even if you weren't a vampire, noblemen's daughters don't travel alone. Baron Cyan would never forgive us."

"I know… That's why I've been so lost…"

"It's fine to worry, to not want to be a burden to others. But I'm disappointed you kept this to yourself until now," Ilia added.

This must have all come as a keen blow, as I could see tears welling in Lainie's eyes.

Alone in her thoughts, not wanting to ask too much of herself, she had thought about trying to solve this problem on her own. At least she was building up her confidence a little, I thought, still trying to put a positive spin on it.

"But your mother, Lainie—do you even remember what she was like?" I asked.

"I have only a few memories from when I was very young… The rest I learned from my father."

"Do you know how your parents met?"

"It was back during my father's adventuring days. He told me they got along so well that they started taking jobs together."

"Hmm… I'm sorry about this, Lainie, but if your mother was an adventurer, we might have a hard time learning much about her."

"What do you mean?"

"A lot of people become adventurers by necessity. They often want to hide their origins, to start a new life. And everyone knows not to dig too deep into other people's backgrounds. That's probably how your mother was able to operate out in the open—by keeping her true identity a secret."

"…So I probably wouldn't find anything…?"

"The odds aren't zero, I suppose, but even so…"

Lainie frowned at this revelation.

There was a difference between no hope and the faintest glimmer of it. No doubt that was why she seemed to be hesitating here.

“Hmm… Euphie?” I asked. “Do you mind?”

“Anis?”

“Would it be all right if I left the capital for a few days? I’ll take Lainie with me, and we’ll see if we can learn anything about her mother. If you need an official reason, just say we’re checking to see how the eastern regions are faring at the end of the rainy season. How about it?”

“Lady Anis?!” Lainie exclaimed.

“We’ll probably only need a few days if we use the Airdra. That will give us an opportunity to ask about Lainie’s mother. What do you think? Do we have your permission?”

“…I see. I *am* worried about the territory in the east,” Euphie murmured, tapping a finger against her lip, deep in thought.

After a short pause, she deflated in apparent resignation. “All right, Anis. It won’t be a formal visit this time, but there’s no need to run off in disguise, either.”

“Thank you. So, what do you think, Lainie? Is that a good idea?”

“…Are you sure this is all right?”

“I told you, didn’t I? We’ll be looking into your mother while we’re there. Think of it as a brief detour,” I said with a laugh.

“…Thank you, Lady Anis.” With that, she offered me a deep, apologetic bow.

I thought it was all settled, until I noticed Ilia staring intently at Lainie.

“What is it, Ilia?” I asked.

“…No, it’s nothing.”

“…We’ll only be a few days. That won’t be too much to bear, will it?”

“I didn’t say anything about missing Lainie when she’s gone.”

“You’re saying it now…”

You really love her, don’t you, Ilia? Maybe this was a natural reaction, given Ilia’s past.

I had to keep from smiling as she stared forlornly.

Euphie suddenly spoke, rising from her deep thoughts. “Ilia, this may be good timing. Do you mind if we address that other matter now?”

“Lady Euphyllia? Do you mean about bringing in additional attendants?”

“Yes. I thought we could put it on hold while focusing on

Lainie, but I think it's time."

"Hm? When did this all happen?" I asked.

"The burden on Ilia has been increasing ever since Lainie started helping me with political affairs. Your father also suggested that I consider this idea."

It would soon be six months since Euphie's coronation. It was certainly true that Lainie had been assisting her with political issues during that time, and that this had left Ilia to take over most tasks at the detached villa.

She may have been used to managing affairs by herself, but Euphie's position—and mine too—had since changed. Which meant that life at the detached villa wouldn't be as simple as it had once been.

"Come to think of it, my mother suggested much the same thing…"

"You're saying it slipped your mind…?" Euphie asked.

"Well, it came hand in hand with another one of her lectures…"

"Please don't erase unpleasant memories, Anis. In any event, we have to consider how to manage things in the detached villa from here on out. And of course, we can't let the burden fall solely on Ilia…"

Ilia herself seemed conflicted by the conversation going on around her.

My position had recovered now, but for the longest time, I had been shunned by society at large. No doubt a part of Ilia still distrusted people as a result.

Nevertheless, thanks to my activities with Halphys and the others, and all my networking efforts through Duke Grantz's connections, I felt like I was improving on the social front. Maybe it was time we provided Ilia with similar opportunities, too?

She remained silent for a moment before letting out a long exhalation. "…It's good timing, and we do need more help around here."

"So you agree, Ilia?"

"I apologize for taking so long to come back to you with an answer, Lady Euphyllia. Thank you for your concern."

"I don't mind. I enjoy our time spent together, all four of us. Even if we take on more staff, we'll still have these special moments. Some things shouldn't be changed, and I'm quite of a mind to leave them be. Thank you, Ilia," Euphie said with a gentle

smile.

Closing her eyes, Ilia offered a deep, respectful bow.

People, the environment, the whole world—it was all changing, ever so slowly. We had to do our best not to get left behind, and to make sure that we had no regrets.

Yes, the day's events had certainly left me pondering.

* * *

Tilty dropped by the detached palace the next day, and so I told her about our new plans.

"Oh? You're looking for information on Lainie's mother?" she asked.

"Yes. That's why I want you to take over preliminary work on the artificial anti-vampire magicite."

"Hmm… You know, Anis, I wouldn't mind joining you on your little escapade."

"Huh?! Tilty?!"

"Why do you look so surprised…?"

"How could I *not* be surprised?"

I mean, this was Tilty. She was a complete shut-in and hated leaving her villa at any cost. Despite being the daughter of a nobleman, she never participated in social events, and she loathed being around other people.

Just hearing that she wanted to go *anywhere* was surprising enough, but why did she want to join us on this particular outing?

"Either way, we're not going to make any progress on the artificial magicite without Lainie. I don't need to be here to supervise if all we can do is get the materials ready. Besides, I'd like to learn more about Lainie's mom."

"There's no guarantee we'll find any solid leads, you know," I pointed out.

"I understand—ah. Maybe Lainie doesn't want me to come."

That damn Tilty, trying to deflect.

"M-me…? But are you sure you want to come out?" Lainie asked nervously.

Tilty gave a weak shrug. "I stay in because I like keeping to myself. Which means I'm fine going out if there's an errand to run. I visit you all the time at the detached palace, right?"

"…As Lady Anis said, there's no guarantee you'll be able to satisfy your *curiosity*, though…"

"That's fine. I need to do a little shopping in the east, anyway. Prices are higher during the rainy season, and ingredients aren't as fresh either, you know? Think of this like killing two birds with one stone. Or maybe you really *don't* want me to come?"

"I—I didn't say that…" Lainie glanced my way awkwardly.

I knew what she wanted to say. Tilty had a difficult personality and practically zero social skills. Of course Lainie was worried that she might cause unexpected problems if we brought her along.

"…You won't start any fights, Tilty?" I asked.

"Hey, I'm not you."

"What do you mean by that?!"

"The reckless, out-of-control princess is telling *me* not to start fights?"

"Do you want me to have you arrested for lèse-majesté?" I blurted out in anger.

Tilty merely responded with a loud snort.

I *was* a little worried, but seeing as she had asked us herself, we could probably trust her to behave. Yes, she had a somewhat twisted nature, but she was also steadfastly loyal at heart.

"I'll pay attention and do what you say, all right? And I'll be careful not to cause any problems. Will that do?"

"…If you're willing to go that far, I suppose I don't mind," I answered.

"And you, Lainie?"

"I'm fine with it. I think it will do you some good to see the outside world. I know you have your reasons, but it isn't healthy to be cooped up inside all the time," Lainie said with a faint smile.

Tilty looked away, wrinkling her nose with disgust.

"Ah, Tilty… A pasty mushroom lady, cooped up for something like ten thousand years. Yeah, this might finally be your chance to get out," I joked.

"You're one to talk," Tilty shot back. "And here I was thinking you had graduated from your Princess Peculiar days. You're still a magic-obsessed idiot."

"*I'm* the idiot?! What about you?! Maybe I *won't* let you come!"

"Yes, yes, I'm sorry."

"You don't mean that one little bit!"

In the end, we fell back into our usual groove. And so it

happened that Tilty would be joining us on our trip.

* * *

Lainie's journey to retrace her mother's footsteps was set to begin the day after the rainy season ended.

Ostensibly, the purpose of our trip was to check on conditions in the eastern regions now that the rains had passed. At the same time, we would use the opportunity to make inquiries concerning Lainie's mother.

"Thanks for escorting us again, Garkie, Navre," I said to the two men joining us.

"Of course. I've been concerned about the situation in the east, so I'm glad for the opportunity to tag along," Garkie responded lightheartedly.

"You can count on me to do my duty," Navre added, taking his task incredibly seriously.

The two of them were turning into a bit of an uneven duo, and I was beginning to take it for granted that they came as a set.

"Thank you for standing in for me while I'm away, Lady Halphys," Lainie said.

"You take care. Leave the job of assisting Queen Euphyllia to me," Halphys answered.

Lainie, it seemed, had deputized Halphys to serve in her stead during her absence.

Over the past few months, the two of them had become fast friends. After all, they were both earnest and good-natured at heart.

"If you have time, Halphys, I'd appreciate it if you could prepare some artificial magicite materials," I added.

"Will do. Take care of yourself, Lady Anisphia," Halphys said, straightening up slightly.

The sight warmed my heart a little.

Yes, she was growing used to life with everyone. I felt like she had gained a newfound sense of confidence. When she had first joined me, she had been constantly worried that she couldn't keep up with the rest of us. I was deeply moved to see how much she had grown.

"Lainie."

"Ilia."

“Please, do be careful,” Ilia said lightly, brushing her thumb over Lainie’s cheek.

“I will,” Lainie answered with a gentle, bashful smile. “I’m off.”

Ilia’s expression was calm as she watched her go, but I could sense a deep loneliness in her gaze.

Then she glanced across at me. I tried to look away, but I wasn’t fast enough.

“You should be careful too, Lady Anisphia,” she said with a sigh. “I pray nothing goes awry along the way. And please take good care of Lainie.”

“You don’t need to keep reminding me. We’ll be fine.”

“And don’t cause any unnecessary trouble for her.”

“You’re way too overprotective, you know, Ilia…?” I muttered.

Ilia gave me a sharp look, and I quickly pretended to cough.

“Anis,” Euphie said, appearing by my side. “Please be careful on your journey.”

“Thanks, Euphie. You take it easy, too.”

“I’m already giddy for your return, Anis.”

“…Be gentle when I get back, okay?”

“That’s up to you, Anis,” she said with a chuckle before leaning in close.

Our cheeks brushed together lightly as she gave me a little peck. Right in front of everybody!

“Euphie!”

“Excuse me.”

“…Ngh… Yes, yes, yes! Let’s get going!” I clapped my hands, hoping to distract everyone from what just happened, though I couldn’t fail to notice the blood rushing to my cheeks.

Tilty watched with an exasperated look. “Where to first?” she asked.

“Lainie’s old orphanage. Of all the places on our itinerary, that’s the one closest to here,” I replied.

“…Isn’t that where her mother is buried?”

“Yes.”

“And she doesn’t know *how* her mother died, does she?”

“She was pretty young at the time, so she doesn’t remember any details…”

“Hmm. How does a vampire with regenerative abilities die? Maybe some kind of vampire-specific disease?”

“Tilty…I know you’re brimming with curiosity, but try to be a

little more conscientious, would you…?”

“Aren’t you curious? If there’s a disease only vampires are susceptible to, we need to make sure Lainie doesn’t catch it, yes?”

“That’s…true, I suppose.”

“And I’m not just saying this for curiosity’s sake, you know? We don’t know nearly enough about vampires yet. I’m afraid of what I don’t know, so we need to learn more. I don’t really care what happens to the country, but I’ll be really disappointed if I can’t keep pursuing my hobbies.”

“You’re as refreshingly selfish as ever, Tilty…”

“Well, Euphyllia is queen now. I’m not about to monopolize your time if it means butting heads with her,” Tilty said without meeting my gaze, her arms crossed.

“…You look like you’re trying not to act embarrassed, Lady Anis…,” Lainie whispered.

I couldn’t hold it in anymore and broke into a grin.

With that, Tilty raised her head and began to tug on Lainie’s cheek. “Was that really called for? Hmm?”

“Aaah! Eeek! Owww!” Lainie squealed, teary-eyed, as Tilty continued to persecute her.

I breathed a deep sigh, my shoulders relaxing at this playful scene.

CHAPTER 2
In Search of Her Mother

A few hours after leaving the royal capital, we arrived at Lainie's old orphanage.

Her eyes narrowed as she stared up at the orphanage, its main building appearing to have been built decades ago. There may have been a hint of nostalgia in her expression, but her gaze was distant.

"It's hardly changed at all…," she murmured.

"…Do you miss it?" I asked.

"Yes. I have good memories here, and bad ones, too…"

"Lainie…"

"I'm all right, Lady Anis. Shall we go in?"

As we stepped foot into the orphanage grounds, the children playing in the courtyard gave us curious glances.

An elderly woman was keeping watch over the children, and her eyes widened in surprise when she recognized her visitor.

"Hello," Lainie called out.

"…Is that you, Lainie?"

"I'm sorry to bother you, dropping by without notice. How have you been?"

"It *is* you, Lainie… No, perhaps I should be calling you *Miss* Lainie…?" The elderly woman seemed to be overcome by a wide range of emotions, but she offered a polite dip of her head in an apparent effort to shake them off.

Lainie had been moved from one orphanage to another during her childhood, the result of multiple incidents involving her vampire powers.

I suspected that something must have happened here as well. Perhaps it involved this elderly woman?

"Excuse me," I stepped in. "Are you the director of this orphanage?"

"Y-yes…! A-are you Miss Lainie's…? Oh my…!"

"Um… Yes…," Lainie said.

"Anisphia Wynn Palettia," I said in greeting. "I'm traveling in private, so I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't stand on ceremony."

"I—I thought it was you…! I—I never would have expected a

royal princess to visit us…! Y-yes, I'm the director here…! Ah, what should I do…?!"

"We'll be leaving soon, so don't worry, please."

"I—I see… A-and what brings you here…?"

"We want to visit the grave of Lainie's mother. We'd also like to hear a little about her, if that's okay."

"Miss Lainie's mother… That would be Tiris," the director said with a nod.

This must have calmed her a little, as she caught her breath before addressing us again. "In that case, let me show you to her resting place."

"Thank you."

I asked Garkie and Navre to stand guard over the Airdra and the Airbikes as we took a look. The rest of us—Lainie, Tilty, and myself—followed the director to a cemetery behind the orphanage. There were more graves than I had been expecting.

How long had this orphanage been here? Just the realization that these headstones belonged to children who had lost their parents filled me with deep sadness.

It wasn't long before the director stopped in front of one headstone in particular. "This is Tiris's grave."

"Mother…," Lainie whispered, kneeling down and stroking the well-designed gravestone. Though unadorned, the grave was clearly well-maintained.

"…It's still beautiful. Thank you for looking after it."

"Of course. That's part of my job…"

Lainie remained on her knees, putting her hands together in quiet prayer. I offered a few unspoken words, too.

I don't know how long we remained there, but when I opened my eyes, Lainie was still praying.

When finally she stood up, the director seemed to be remembering something from long ago. "…You're the spitting image of your mother, Miss Lainie."

"Really? My father often says so, too…," she answered, resting a hand against her cheek as she sank deep in thought.

Having finished at the gravesite, we went into the main orphanage building, where we were shown to a drawing room.

The director brought tea for us to quench our thirst, and so we decided to turn to the main purpose of today's visit.

"Could you tell us what you know about Tiris?" I asked.

“If I can be of any help, I’ll share everything I can.”

“Thank you.”

“I don’t mind… It’s time enough I atoned for my sins.”

“I see…”

“This was back when Miss Lainie was with us. She ended up getting injured—a blade wound. But instead of helping her, I joined in. I said some terrible things… You don’t know how much I’ve regretted that ever since.”

“It was my fault…,” Lainie murmured.

“Not at all! That was more than a children’s quarrel. If I had stayed calm, I might have been able to find a better way to resolve it…,” the director confessed, wiping away the tears spilling from her eyes.

It must have been bad if Lainie had been stabbed. My heart panged just thinking of the chaos her latent powers had caused.

“Well,” Lainie said, her voice calm and composed. “I don’t think there was anything else you could have done back then. The fact that you’ve been thinking about me all this time and tending to my mother’s grave shows that your heart is good.”

“…I appreciate your kind words, Miss Lainie,” the director said with a deep bow.

She must have felt calmer now that Lainie had offered her forgiveness, as the woman’s expression finally softened.

“Um, I was wondering if you could tell me about my mother?” Lainie urged.

“Yes. Tiris… She was unforgettable, like a sunny day after a long rain. She left a strong impression on me. She was so warm and gentle. You remind me so much of her when you smile, Miss Lainie. It’s lovely.”

“R-really…? I don’t remember a lot from back then…”

“You were still so young when you lost her…”

“When did you first meet her?”

“That would be when she first brought you here, Miss Lainie. The old director was so shocked. Your mother told us that she had an incurable disease, so she wanted to leave you with us so you wouldn’t be entirely alone when her time came.”

“An incurable disease?” Tilty leaned forward.

“Yes. She asked us if we could take care of Miss Lainie after she passed away…”

“Did she mention what kind of disease?” Tilty pressed.

“No. I was a little confused at first. She carried herself with such dignity that I couldn’t help but wonder if she really was ill…”

“Dignity, you say…?”

“That’s right. Normally, when someone is approaching death, a specter hovers over them, you might say. But it was like she had accepted her fate—like her only concern was for her daughter’s future.”

Did Tiris realize that she was dying? Had she done everything in her power to make sure that Lainie wouldn’t have any trouble making ends meet once she was alone in the world?

We were all but certain that Tiris must have been a vampire, with a vampire’s innate charm—though even if she had been a normal person, she might still have left a wise and determined impression. But something was bothering me about all this.

Why hadn’t she taught Lainie about vampires?

That fact that she hadn’t told her daughter anything about her true nature seemed to fly in the face of her efforts to do everything she could to secure her future.

“…Do you remember talking about anything else with Tiris?” I asked.

“We didn’t speak very much, actually… I was so worried that Miss Lainie might be sick, too…”

“Ah… I see,” Lainie whispered.

“Tiris donated a large sum of money to use if Miss Lainie came down with an illness or encountered any other problems… I had to stay with Miss Lainie at a nearby inn for a time, to keep her away from the other children, just in case.”

“You couldn’t refuse?”

“No. At the time, the orphanage was struggling with money. Fortunately, Miss Lainie was in good health, so we decided to accept her soon after Tiris passed away…”

“You didn’t get the full story?” I asked.

“No… As I said, she didn’t seem particularly ill to me, so I didn’t expect her to pass on so soon.”

“Hmm… So she didn’t *look* ill…,” I repeated.

“She passed away in her sleep. I’m afraid I still don’t know precisely what illness she had.”

“Did she leave anything else, other than money? Any belongings, maybe…?”

“No, nothing. It seems she had already finished sorting through

her personal effects before coming here. She'd sold them all to provide for Miss Lainie…"

"I see…"

We weren't likely to get any more information, I sensed. It was time to wrap things up.

At present, Tiris remained a rather elusive individual.

There were still so many unknowns, and it was difficult to gauge her true intentions from her actions alone. Despite this, she seemed the sort to get along well with others, which only added to the sense of mystery.

Just who was she, and what was she thinking when she entrusted Lainie to the orphanage?

I couldn't begin to imagine why she had left Baron Cyan, and that only added to my frustration.

"Thank you for sharing this with us," Lainie said.

"…I'm glad to see you haven't lost your cheer, Miss Lainie. Life can't have been easy for you after leaving us, I assume? When I heard that Baron Cyan had taken you in, I hoped for the best… I'm glad to see you've had blessings of your own."

There was true relief in the director's smile.

"Yes," Lainie answered, returning her smile warmly. "They're very good to me. Thank you for everything."

"Thank goodness. Stay well, Miss Lainie."

"You as well."

* * *

After leaving the orphanage, we decided to stop for the rest of the day at an inn.

We took two rooms, split between the men and the women. As such, Garkie and Navre had taken the room next to ours.

Tilty was lying quietly on her bed, having already dozed off.

Lainie was sitting by the window, staring outside deep in thought. I didn't want to leave her alone, so I tried striking up a conversation. "I'm sorry we didn't learn much today, Lainie."

"It's fine. It was better than nothing."

"…Right. It *is* something, at least."

The conversation entered a brief lull—then, Lainie turned back to me. "Do you ever get scared, sometimes, Lady Anis?" she asked.

“Hmm? Where’s this coming from?”

“I’m happy now…”

Lainie’s expression was fragile, her eyes downcast. She looked so ephemeral that I worried she might shatter if I reached out to touch her.

“For the longest time, I never knew real happiness. I had been living in orphanages for so long, and after my father took me in, I was expected to live like nobility. It wasn’t easy. And it just kept going on, and on, forever and ever…”

She was smiling, but that was a facade. Inside, she was close to tears. I had seen her like this once before—a long time ago, back when I had first questioned her about how Allie had broken off his engagement.

She was fragile. She was close to resigning herself to her fate entirely, if she hadn’t already—she had wounds that time couldn’t wash away.

“I’m happy now, I think. I was able to make amends with Lady Euphyllia and reconcile with Prince Algard. And above all, I’ve been able to share my feelings with Ilia. I’ve found something worth doing, and I really am happy. But still…”

“…But?”

“What happened to my mother? She gave birth to me, disappeared without saying anything to my father, and set out to raise me on the road… Was *she* happy?”

“…Lainie…”

She raised her face, staring far into the distance through the window. “If she was, why did she leave? When I ask myself that, I’m reminded that I’m not a normal human being. I’m a vampire, and Ilia is human. Before I know it, she’ll be gone, but I’ll still be here…”

“Lainie, you don’t need to…”

Vampires were the result of an obsession with eternal life.

Even now, she couldn’t live without drinking the blood of living creatures. Even if she didn’t want to think about it, there could be no forgetting the gulf separating her from the rest of us.

And knowing that she would outlive her loved ones, she couldn’t get that fear out of her head. I could easily imagine how distressing it must have been for her.

“I’m happy now, but I’m afraid of losing that happiness… And that’s also why I’m afraid of finding greater happiness… Sometimes,

I just want to run away…"

I know, I wanted to say to her, but I didn't know whether to voice that. That hesitation held me back, and the words died inside me.

Lainie turned to face me. Then, with a faint, fleeting smile, she asked, "Have you ever stopped to think about it, Lady Anis?"

"…Think about what?"

"Lady Anis…will you not leave Lady Euphyllia behind one day?"

…Ah. She was right, of course. I would die long before Euphie did.

When that time came, she would be left alone. My heart ached just thinking about it. A shiver rose from deep within me and made me want to lash out.

But that urge wouldn't hurt me. I already had an answer to that question, and I was prepared for it when the moment eventually came.

"Lainie, I would do anything for Euphie. Even if it meant putting my humanity to the side," I said, looking straight at her.

Lainie stared right back.

"I was the one who pushed her into giving up her humanity in the first place," I continued. "So I've never thought about leaving her behind… I'm willing to lose my own humanity, too, if necessary."

"…You're incredible, Lady Anis," Lainie said with a self-deprecating laugh, breaking eye contact. "But I'm still afraid… I can always offer to make Ilia into a vampire. That's one way we could stay together… But can I really make her *happy*? Happy enough that it would be worth losing everything else? That's what scares me…"

"If you ask me, you're allowed to feel that fear."

"…You think so?" she murmured in a faltering, hesitant voice.

"Fear teaches us caution. We all have to act rashly sometimes, but we can't *always* be reckless. If we forgot what it felt like to be afraid, we'd lose the courage to step up when we needed to. So I think it's fine to be scared about certain things, you know?" I said, approaching her side and laying a hand on her shoulder. "Besides, I

want you to be here with me, too, Lainie. I want Euphie in my life, yes, but nothing would make me happier than having both you and Ilia stay by my side as well. This might be selfish of me, but if there's a future like that out there somewhere, I want to make it happen. How about you, Lainie?"

She remained silent for a long moment, pursing her lips. Eventually, she slowly lifted her face, turning back toward me—and as she did so, her smile was like a sunny morning after a night of rain.

"You're right. Yes, I would like that."

"If the idea brings you real happiness, it's natural to be afraid of failing to reach it."

"And it makes you want to run far away… Maybe that's how my mother felt."

"…Maybe. But that could hurt someone you love. When someone you love vanishes without saying anything, and you have no idea why they're gone… That's really hard."

I thought of Allie. We'd reconciled during the royal tour a few months back, but without that chance, we might have been estranged forever.

I was weak. I couldn't be satisfied just protecting myself, and I had failed to live up to my responsibilities. Above all, I couldn't bring myself to face him.

That was my fault. It was a wound that would fill me with deep regret each time I had cause to remember. But I couldn't wallow in my guilt. After all, I was still alive. I would spare no effort to live life to its fullest. Even if there were times when I felt like stopping, I would keep pushing forward until the end.

All the more so because I wanted to keep those I cared about close. If I didn't face them properly, I risked losing everything. I couldn't afford to look away, even if I was afraid.

"It's hard, truly believing in something," I observed.

"It is, isn't it…?"

The two of us stared out into the night sky filled with countless glimmering stars.

"…You really *are* incredible, Lady Anis," Lainie murmured.

"I'm not so sure. I suppose it's hard to see yourself from the outside. From where I'm standing, you're so kind, generous, and caring, Lainie. I'm sure you'll be fine once you work out which path you want to take. You just need to take the time to make sure it's the right one."

"…I wish I could be everything you see in me. Would someone like that be able to overcome all these worries?"

“I’m sure you will, Lainie.”

With those words of mutual support, we took in the beautiful night sky.

* * *

The day after we visited the grave of Lainie’s mother, we set out farther east.

According to what Lainie had heard from her father, Baron Cyan, he and Tiris had first met at the adventurers’ guildhall where they were both based.

Hoping that we might be able to learn more about Lainie’s mother there, we set out for the town of Filwach.

Filwach was one of the potential mining sites for spirit stones that we had identified in the vicinity of the Black Forest, and it was also one of the largest towns in the eastern regions. As such, it tended to attract a great many adventurers.

“It’s been a long time since I last stopped by here…,” I mused.

“Have you worked around here, Lady Anis?” Lainie asked.

“Yeah, I’ve passed through quite a bit. The area isn’t as well-developed as the Black Forest, but compared to most places, it’s easier for people to band together here. Easier to hunt monsters, too, with the hunting grounds being maintained pretty well.”

As Lainie and I discussed my history with the area, we arrived at the Adventurers Guild.

The guildhall may have been smaller than that in the royal capital, but I quite liked its rustic character.

I let the nostalgia wash over me, while Tilty squinted in my direction, holding a parasol over her head. “Adventurers, huh…? Aren’t they a rough sort? They tend to bring trouble.”

“You’re one to talk! You dive into trouble headfirst!” I retorted. “What did I tell you about picking fights?! And just so you know, I may be retired, but I’m a former adventurer myself! A high-ranking one at that!”

“Why would a royal princess even set out as an adventurer, much less achieve a high rank?” Navre muttered under his breath.

“That’s Lady Anis for you,” Garkie chuckled.

Hey, this isn’t about me, all right?! What’s important here is getting information about Tiris!

After taking a moment to regain my composure, I threw open the doors to the hall with a mighty thump.

"Hi there!"

I immediately caused a scene. The adventurers eating and drinking in the guildhall's dining area were all startled to see me.

"Huh…? Whoa, Lady Anis?!"

"Wha—?! It's her! What's the Marauder Princess doin' here?! Shouldn't you be in the castle?!"

"Ain't you quit adventurin'?!"

I raised an eyebrow, fixing them all in a glare. There was one word among the hubbub that I couldn't stomach.

"Which one of you called me the *Marauder* Princess?! How many times do I have to tell you?! At least call me the *Mad* Princess!"

"Ha-ha-ha! Sorry, my bad!"

"Forgive us, Lady Anis! How about a drink?!"

"You're here on the sly, aren't ya?! Then drink, drink!"

"I'm not here for drinking!" I cried back, frustrated. I could feel my cheeks turning red with embarrassment.

Nope, this place hadn't changed at all.

This was the same Adventurers Guild that I knew and loved. It was easy to be yourself here, without having to worry about title or status, though things *could* get rough at times.

As I soaked up this warm, familiar feeling, Navre was wound tight as a spring. "They seem to admire you, Lady Anisphia," he murmured to me.

"Ah, well, for a while, adventuring *was* her main line of work," Tilty added.

"She's probably more suited to it than all that royal stuff," Garkie whispered in agreement.

The only one who didn't join in on this conversation was Lainie, wearing a slightly awkward smile.

I clapped my hands together in an effort to change the mood. "All right, all right," I called out. "Sorry to disappoint, but this isn't my big return to adventuring. I'm here because I have questions."

"Questions?"

"I heard that Baron Cyan used to be based here. It's him I want to ask about."

"Ah, Dragus, you mean? He's risen up in the world. Doesn't show his face 'round these parts no more," one of the adventurers

called back, reminiscing. He looked to be around the same age as the baron, maybe a little older.

"These days, he teaches swordsmanship to the knights at the royal palace," I explained. "He also instructs them how to use the magical tools I've built."

"Ha-ha-ha! He really *has* moved up in the world! And to think he's takin' on work from you, Lady Anis!"

"The guild's two brightest stars have come together! Hah! Maybe we should drink to your success?!"

"You don't need my permission to drink. You know that," I said with a sigh.

"You can say that again!"

Laughter and guffaws erupted all around as the adventurers drained their tankards and ordered more.

I headed for the counter and pulled my wallet out of my pocket, then handed a few gold coins to the barwoman.

"Eh, g-gold?!"

"Take it," I said. "Drinks are on me today, so use it all up."

"Aren't you generous, Your Highness? Or should we be calling you the Royal Sister now?"

"A toast to our generous princess! Drink up, Lady Anis!"

"I told you, I'm not here to drink," I said with a smile.

The adventurers were all in high spirits, and it lifted my spirits as well. They really were mercenary—or easy to handle, to put it more kindly.

"I heard Baron Cyan used to have a friend, a female adventurer he liked to hang around with back when he was based out here," I said. "Does anyone know of her?"

"Ah, you must mean Tiris," answered one of the older adventurers. It was the same man who had responded when I first mentioned the baron.

Lainie startled. I gave her a sideways glance to make sure that she was all right before I turned back to the middle-aged adventurer.

"Yes, Tiris. Can you tell me what you know about her?"

"Why do you want to know about Tiris?"

"She was my mother," Lainie said, moving to stand by my side. "I want to know what she was like before she passed on."

The adventurer's eyes widened in astonishment. "Tiris…?! No, you're not her… You look just like her. She was your mother, you

said? You're Tiris's daughter, miss?!"

"My name is Lainie Cyan… My father is Dragus Cyan."

"Dragus and Tiris had a kid?!" the adventurer exclaimed, so astonished that his voice echoed off the walls.

The middle-aged adventurer wasn't the only one taken aback hearing this—several others all but froze in place, too, their eyes turning as one to Lainie.

"What?! H-huh?! They had a daughter?! I mean, she's the spitting image of Tiris, but with *Dragus*?!"

"You're Dragus's girl, miss?! How about that…!"

"How did Dragus end up with such a pretty daughter?! What's the world comin' to, eh!"

"Nggghhh! That man really knows how to pick 'em! Why's *he* got all the luck?!"

"The more you look at her, the more she looks just like Tiris…"

Making a huge commotion, the adventurers gathered around to inspect Lainie's face—prompting Navre and Garkie to immediately step in to shield her.

"All right, all right, calm down," I urged. "Yes, this is Lainie Cyan, Baron Cyan's daughter. We're here today because she has some questions about her mother. Basically, she wants to get a better idea of who she was. I'm really just her chaperone."

"I see, so that's what this is about. Ah, what a surprise…"

The middle-aged adventurer and his colleagues slowly regained their composure, but their eyes remained fixed on Lainie.

"Um, I was wondering if you could share what you know…," Lainie stammered.

"O-oh… I'm afraid there ain't much we can tell you, though?"

"Tiris was as secretive as they come, you know?"

The adventurers seemed at a loss as to how to respond to our request.

"She was an elusive woman, that Tiris."

"She was great at gaining people's trust, and at breaking up fights, too. Tended to attract a lot of attention to herself."

"She was always hangin' out with Dragus. I guess they *were* around the same age. They were pretty close, so I always guessed they might end up tyin' the knot one day…"

I frowned at this news.

Quick to gain others' trust, good at settling fights, and yet she was elusive, a mystery.

…Was this all the result of her vampire powers?

"One day, she suddenly vanished… I'd never seen Dragus so depressed. Really felt for him, I did."

"She disappeared?" I asked. "Without warning?"

"Not a word to no one. Just up and left. She was an adventurer—a darned good one, though—so we all wondered whether somethin' had happened to her."

"Dragus was really down in the dumps after that. Not surprising, considering how much he cared about her. Must have come as a heck of a shock, seeing as she didn't say nothing to him, either."

"Um, how did my father come across at the time…?" Lainie asked.

"Rough, I'll tell ya. Could hardly bear to look at him. Turned into a right lunatic, he did, without Tiris 'round. Guess you could say he's got losing her to thank for that noble title he won himself."

"I heard from friends in the capital that he found himself a good wife and settled down. I knew him during the worst of it, so I was glad to hear he'd found peace."

"Yes, he's very close to my stepmother. She's good to me, too…," Lainie remarked.

"I see. I'm glad to hear it."

Lainie's expression softened with relief.

Listening to everyone's stories, I got the impression that Baron Cyan was a good man, beloved by all those around him.

Maybe Lainie felt the same way. That would explain why she seemed so relaxed now.

"Ah, but you're a dainty lass. Not at all like old Dragus…"

"Come on, now. Doesn't she strike you as an honest girl, just like Tiris?"

"Does Lainie really look like her mother?" I asked.

"Identical, like two peas in a pod. Hard to believe she's Dragus's at all, if you ask me."

"You can say that again!"

Maybe they were drinking a little *too* much, as the group started chortling with laughter. If Baron Cyan were here, he would beat them all to a pulp.

"So, about Tiris. She was almost…otherworldly, you know? But not like a noblewoman. Weren't no one like her, and her skills as an adventurer were top notch. No matter who she worked with, she

always delivered. If she had kept on going, she probably would've been made a chapter chief sooner or later."

"So she was *that* talented…"

Becoming leader of one of the guild's many chapters was no simple task. You needed an incredible reputation, plus the support of your fellow guild members.

In that respect, if Tiris did indeed have both of those things, she may well have secured such a position for herself one day.

"You said she used to work with Dragus often. The two were close, then?" I asked.

"She was a good lass, could get along with practically anyone. But at the same time, she always kept herself at arm's length, you know? She was a good woman, and we all liked her, but no one ever really got to know her all that well."

"Dragus knew how to play along and work with her without stepping on her toes. From the outside, they looked like the perfect match."

The adventurers seemed to have a mix of reactions, some sentimental, some tinged with regret.

But I couldn't sense any animosity at play. They were being honest here. And that was enough to tell me that their memories of Baron Cyan and Tiris were good ones.

"They made a perfect team, those two did. If you asked me back then, I'd have told you it was only a matter of time before they were more than a team. So I was confounded when I heard she'd up and left like that."

"Lainie, you said your name was? Is Tiris…?" one of the adventurers began.

Lainie offered up a faint smile, then gently and silently shook her head. "We traveled around the countryside after she gave birth to me, but she fell ill while I was very young…"

"…I see…"

A chorus of deep, heavy sighs filled the room. The merriment of the adventurers had turned to sorrow.

"I can't even imagine Tiris falling sick, but I suppose no one's invincible. And leaving such a gorgeous daughter behind without anyone even knowing… It's cruel, it is…," an adventurer said under his breath, a slight tremor to his voice.

A sense of melancholy filled the air.

"It's a good job Dragus found you!"

“Yes. He recognized me as my mother’s daughter the minute he arrived at the orphanage where I was staying…”

“Of all the luck! So his lover, his wife, and his daughter are all jewels…! Why does *he* get everything?!”

“Damn him! Here’s to Dragus, the luckiest scoundrel in the world!”

“And another for that heartbreaker Tiris!”

The adventurers all raised their drinks into the air in somber silence.

This was how they paid homage to the dead—grieve over the loss but try to brush it aside with a laugh so as not to sink into despair. After all, adventurers died often, for all sorts of reasons. You couldn’t let it drag you down. That would be to risk slipping up on a job and losing your own life too.

Trying to rally myself, I turned to my next question. There were still so many things that I had to ask.

“So, do you know where Tiris came from? Like her hometown, or where her family lived?”

“Not that I can recall.”

“She said she was from out east. I assumed she meant the frontier… Does anyone else have any idea?”

The remaining adventurers all shook their heads. No one seemed to know.

She must have taken care not to reveal her origins. But the sudden mention of the east struck a chord in my memory.

Not too long ago, we had heard about other vampires residing somewhere beyond the eastern frontier.

In all likelihood, Tiris came not from the frontier, but even farther east. That was the only possibility that made any sense.

But if Tiris was a vampire hailing from beyond the realm’s borders, what purpose could she have had for coming to the Kingdom of Palettia…?

While I was busy pondering this question, Lainie thanked the adventurers for sharing their anecdotes.

“Thank you for telling me about her,” she said. “I really do appreciate it.”

“Don’t mention it. I’m sorry we don’t have more to offer you. Ah, you really are her spitting image, Lainie. You’re gonna be a real beauty, that’s for sure.”

“Oi, back off! She’s less than half your age!”

“Dragus will hang you from your guts!”

“Shaddup!”

The chiding shouts soon turned to laughter. Lainie, too, was quickly growing accustomed to the personalities of the adventurers, responding with a composed smile.

I doubted that we would learn any more about Tiris for now. Just before I could suggest that we call it a day, the middle-aged adventurer from before called out to me. “Lady Anis? This is a separate matter…but I heard somethin’ you should probably know.”

“What is it?”

“People are sayin’ the monsters ’round these parts have been actin’ strange since the start of the rainy season… It’s got us all on edge…”

“…In what way?”

“Well, to start with, there’s so few of them…” The adventurer trailed off, unable to make heads or tails of it.

I tilted my head, my interest piqued. “What do you mean? There aren’t enough monsters…?”

“No. You can go to the huntin’ grounds, but you won’t find much.”

“…They’ve left? Like before a stampede?”

“No, it doesn’t feel like that. The air’s different.”

“So it doesn’t feel like a stampede…and yet there aren’t many monsters about? Are you sure about their numbers?”

“Yeah. A lot of us have noticed it. But like I said, there’s no sign of a stampede. It’s just…spooky.”

“I can’t really put my finger on it,” another adventurer joined in, giving similar testimony. “It’s just quiet. The kinda quiet that makes your hair stand on end…”

In other words, this wasn’t just one person’s imagination getting the better of them.

The adventurer who had just entered the conversation rubbed his arms anxiously. “There’s no sign of monsters in the forest,” he continued in a hushed voice. “Every time I go in, I can’t hear the sound of it—the rustling of the trees, or anything.”

“I felt it too,” the middle-aged adventurer added. “The forest ain’t changed. It’s just the monsters are gone. If there was a stampede, they’d at least be havin’ scuffles over territory, right?”

Listening to the adventurers’ testimonies, I rested a hand under my chin and tried to piece together everything that I had just heard.

The number of monsters in the hunting grounds had diminished, and the other creatures of the forest were gone without a trace.

"…So they just vanished one day, without any warning? What about other animals, aside from monsters?" I asked.

"…Come to think of it, I haven't seen many of them, either."

"That *is* ominous. You'd expect to find something if there was a stampede coming…"

Stampedes were often the result of the overall number of monsters increasing, leading to territorial disputes as they vied over diminishing territory. Such conflicts always left visible signs to the attentive observer.

How could the monsters vanish without leaving behind any clues as to why? It certainly wasn't a normal occurrence, which meant that something out of the ordinary was afoot here.

"Does everyone know about this? Have you told people to be on their guard?" I asked.

"The chapter chief put out a warnin'. And the guild has requested additional patrols, askin' people not to push too deep into the forest and to report anythin' out of place."

"That's good to hear."

"Yeah. I hope we're worryin' over nothin', but I thought I'd better let you know."

"I appreciate it."

After thanking the adventurers for the information, we left the guildhall.

On the way back to the inn, I mulled over the ominous reports we'd just heard.

"Hmm… Something must be going on in the forest…"

Navre's expression was serious, too. "…Princess Anisphia, should we wrap things up here and return to the royal capital?"

"Do you think we should, Navre?" I asked.

"I'm not particularly familiar with the adventurers here, nor with the forest…but if you think the situation is out of the ordinary, there's a good chance that trouble is afoot. In that case, our first priority has to be your safety."

"…I suppose that's true…"

Navre was right, of course. Given my status, it was only natural that we steer clear of any danger and return to the capital.

But something was holding me back.

A sense of foreboding had fallen over me after listening to the adventurers' stories.

Could I really just leave things be and wait for them to play out? At that moment, a light impact hit me square on the forehead. I looked up to find Tilty staring at me.

"That hurt! What was that for, Tilty?!"

"Yes, yes. You want to investigate anyway, right?"

"Huh?! What are you suggesting, Lady Claret?!" Navre gawked, incredulous.

Tilty fixed Navre with a dark frown before letting out a resigned sigh. "We're here in private, so you can just call me by name, you know? Besides, Navre, what you're saying might make perfect sense, but do you realize who you're talking to?"

"…I—I…"

"Don't look at me when you're talking to me. I can't stand it," Tilty said, shaking her head in exasperation.

Navre averted his gaze, unable to refute her. *Come on, he had to have known this from the start!*

"If we said we're going home, would you kick up a fuss?" Tilty challenged.

"…W-well, I mean, I might not be able to sleep at night, out of worry. I don't want that," I replied.

"Just spit it out."

"I want to go home *after* investigating!" I confessed, succumbing to the interrogation.

"I thought so. See? We'll just have to add this to our agenda, then."

"…I'm opposed…," Navre insisted in a strained, crushed voice.

"Hmm… I'm on Lady Anis's side, I guess. But officially speaking, I have to agree with Navre," Garkie added.

"Your job is to protect her, Gark. Stand up for yourself a bit more…," Navre murmured.

"Yeah, but there's no way I can talk her out of something once she's really set her mind on it…"

Basically, Garkie was choosing to remain noncommittal. He had faith in my abilities, but he still thought it best that we avoid danger where we could.

"Do we really have to investigate, Lady Anis?" Lainie asked, looking straight at me. Her eyes were piercing, with a strength of will not present before—or maybe I was only imagining it.

I crossed my arms, taking a moment to organize my thoughts and feelings.

"…I think we should," I answered at last.

"Why?"

"I've got a bad feeling about it."

"Hmm… Another of your premonitions…?" Tilty murmured, one eyebrow raised.

"Oh dear… That doesn't bode well…," Lainie added.

Navre watched the two of them with suspicion. "What is it, Lainie? It's just a feeling, right?"

"Lady Anis's premonitions have a way of coming true…"

"She has a *very* high rate of accuracy," Tilty added. "It never bodes well when she feels this way. I've seen it more times than I can count."

"What…?" Navre narrowed his eyes in distrust, putting me at a bit of a loss.

"It's true. I'm not trying to boast, but most times when I feel this way, it means something bad is headed over the horizon."

"…I can't go along with this on the basis of a hunch, even assuming your suspicions are often borne out," Navre protested. "I am *not* in favor of letting Princess Anisphia venture into the forest to investigate. The local adventurers are more than capable of dealing with the situation. We should leave this to them. If you're really worried, we can inform the local lords to remain on high alert."

"That's a very sensible stance…," Tilty remarked.

"But in that case, shouldn't we have stopped her from looking into the forest around Viscount Persimmon's estate last time?" Garkie asked with an inscrutable air.

"Ngh…!" Navre groaned. "Ordinarily, that wouldn't have been appropriate, either! But the viscount didn't have any resources to spare, so we had little choice! No matter how skilled, experienced, and knowledgeable you are, Princess Anisphia, you're irreplaceable! The risk is too great!"

"It isn't even clear there's any real danger yet, though…," I pointed out.

"We cannot rule it out, so as your escort, it's my responsibility to make your safety my highest priority. What do you have to say to *that*, Princess Anisphia?" Navre asked upfront.

He'd phrased it so bluntly, I wasn't entirely sure how to

respond.

Objectively speaking, he wasn't wrong, by any means. There wasn't yet any real danger to steer clear form—I merely *felt* like something bad was approaching.

As such, the situation didn't necessarily call for action on my part. Navre was right, technically. Yet I still couldn't go along with him.

"Right now, I think peace of mind is more important than my safety," I answered.

"…You do realize there's no one else who can take your place if anything should happen to you?"

"I won't do anything rash, and we won't push any deeper into the forest than we have to. We'll just take a look, and if something's wrong, we'll turn back. Can we agree on that?"

"…I will obey your command," Navre said, still unconvinced.

I felt bad about forcing the matter, but it was decided.

Hopefully, it wouldn't take long to work out why the forest was so quiet. We would just have to see what we could find, I thought with a sigh.

"So, who's coming with me…?" I asked.

"I will," said Lainie.

"Me too," Tilty added.

"…Lainie? Tilty? This is the forest we're talking about here, you know? Especially you, Tilty—you hardly ever go outside. Will you be all right?"

"Lainie and I can just follow from above on an Airbike, can't we?" Tilty answered. "There's no need to actually step *into* the forest. And that way, we can leave quickly if we have to. You can report your location to us by sending magic signals up from below. How about it?"

"…Then you should take Navre with you, just in case," I advised. "Garkie and I will go into the forest. I want the three of you to keep an eye on things from above. If we find somewhere you can land inside the forest, we can rendezvous there."

"…Very well," Navre said reluctantly.

"Understood," Garkie nodded.

Thus, we were to be the ones to survey Filwach Forest.

CHAPTER 3
A Quiet Disturbance

I—Lainie Cyan—stared down at the forest from atop the Airbike.

Once we had decided to explore Filwach Forest, Lady Anis had proceeded at once to get ready and set out.

It was a lush forest, located at the foot of a mountain range. People often compared it to the Black Forest, a famous site for extracting spirit stones, though that site was much larger in scale.

"Are Lady Anis and Gark all right…?" I wondered out loud.

"They've only just entered the woods. Look, they're putting a signal up over there," Tilty said from her seat behind me.

Indeed, a magical flare was rising into the air.

Lady Anis and Gark had agreed to indicate their position at regular intervals so that we would know that they were safe. As we approached the area where they had launched the flare, we spotted the two of them through the trees. When she saw us, Lady Anis gave us an energetic wave.

"They're fine, see?" Tilty continued. "Don't worry. She's a high-ranking adventurer."

"That's true…," Navre grumbled beside me.

"Indeed. So maybe you could stand to be a little less grumpy," Tilty shot back.

Navre had remained silent for a while now, glaring at the forest below.

"…Aren't you being a little too optimistic, Miss Tilty?" he muttered.

"I've got reasons to be optimistic. This is Anis we're talking about. You should be more worried about Gark, don't you think? It isn't easy being at her beck and call all the time."

"That's his job… Lady Anis might not listen to us all that often, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't advise her."

"Yes, that's true, most of the time. You're a worthy knight, aren't you?"

"…You seem to be implying otherwise, Miss Tilty. Is there something you want to say to me?"

"Then let me come out with it. You *do* realize who she is?"

“L-Lady Tilty?”

H-huh? Was it me, or had the air become heavier all of a sudden…? I knew that Tilty and Navre weren’t on the best of terms, but this was something else…

I had no idea what to do or how the mood had soured so quickly.

“I want Princess Anisphia to understand her position. She is irreplaceable now—essential to the kingdom’s future.”

“And you’re not wrong, Navre. But it isn’t fair to impose that responsibility on her. You’ve got to use a little common sense sometimes, you realize? There are exceptions to every rule. Why don’t you use your head for once?”

“…Am I not simply imposing common sense on her? What do you propose I do?”

“Just give her a little more time to catch up.”

“…What do you mean?”

“Her *proper* education, if you want to call it that, ended when she was just a girl. But she does know how to behave like royalty—only not due to her upbringing.”

“…You’re saying she isn’t truly aware of her royal status?” Navre asked with a frown, his voice strained.

Tilty let out a bored snort. “That too. But more to the point, she’s not used to having subjects and retainers around her… She can’t fully trust them.”

“…So you think she can’t rely on me?”

“No. I’m saying it will take time for her to develop the level of trust you’re expecting from her. She doesn’t have much experience with retainers. She can put up a good show *playing* at being royalty, but that doesn’t mean she’s really at home in that role. I’d say her mentality is closer to that of a commoner.”

“I can see that, I suppose…”

“So you understand. She’s inexperienced, so she doesn’t know how to accept your advice. She doesn’t know when to trust others, and she doesn’t know *how* to trust. Essentially, she needs to relearn the basics.”

Navre stared back, wide-eyed. He was clearly stunned.

“…It’s that bad?”

“Anis has lived without retainers all this time, you know? How can you expect her to completely place herself in their care when she’s never done that before? She doesn’t know how.”

"…I see…"

Tilty breathed a deep sigh. I could understand all too well what she was trying to get across.

Navre still seemed to be struggling to take this in, so I decided to offer my own view.

"I understand what Tilty is trying to say," I began. "It's all about differences in perception. It really is a matter of adjusting, of letting her get used to all this."

"Lainie?" Navre answered. "What do you mean, differences in perception…?"

"Lady Anis doesn't believe that her retainers will simply follow her as a matter of course. That's why she doesn't know how to handle them."

"Because she didn't take part in royal duties for so long?"

"Exactly," Tilty continued. This conversation was clearly wearing on her. "All those things we take for granted, she doesn't. You need to make your suggestions with that in mind."

Navre remained silent for a moment, his brow furrowed. "…I'll admit that my thinking was too shallow. But at the same time, Princess Anisphia's position is different now. Isn't it important that she learn how to behave around her people?"

"Just because her position has changed? So what? You think it's easy to start trusting people just like that, after being ignored for so long? After being ostracized?"

"…Well…"

"She'll tell you she doesn't care. That it's just the way it's always been for her. Disqualified as a royal, a nuisance as the Princess Peculiar. It's little wonder she's so deeply distrustful."

"Deeply distrustful…? I don't know if I'd say she's like that…"

"She comes across as good-natured, but she's locked her heart away behind thick walls. You're not happy with her either, are you? She won't listen to your judgment."

"…It's true. I can't deny that her past experiences have probably led her to this lack of trust, but that doesn't mean we can let her stay this way. Her Highness's circumstances have changed. Many nobles now look to her for guidance. Her contributions to the kingdom can't be made by anyone else. If she doesn't realize that, it will only cause her trouble in the future. Not to mention for Queen Euphyllia."

"You're a stubborn man, aren't you…?"

“U-um…Tilty? Navre? Please try to relax…,” I interrupted, hoping to get them to cool down. “Navre, I think what Tilty is trying to say is that even though you’re right, you need to give Lady Anis time to accept your advice.”

“…I understand that she wasn’t treated as a member of the royal family for years, and that she isn’t used to her current situation. Still, she has to learn to adapt *sometime*, doesn’t she?”

“You can’t expect her to immediately have confidence in those who made her feel small for so long,” I said. I purposefully kept a harsh edge to my words.

Navre gawked.

“Are you taking her distrust of the nobility into account, Navre?” I continued. “People were always criticizing her behind her back. Yes, I think she’s beginning to open up now, but wounds like that don’t heal quickly…”

“That’s…true, yes.”

“You raise excellent points. However, no one can learn how to properly conduct themselves without time and the right opportunities. That’s why we give people a lengthy education. It’s why practice and patience are so important. Lady Anis has less experience in this than most others. Lady Tilty is saying we need to give her time to catch up, and if we want her to move faster, we need to think carefully about how to encourage her.”

I stole a quick glance at Tilty, watching as she turned away with a huff.

Navre’s expression darkened as he heaved a tired sigh. “…That won’t be easy. I don’t know how to handle her.”

“Who do you think Lady Anis trusts more, Master Navre? You or Gark?”

“…You’re telling me to act more like him?”

“No. My advice is to be more flexible around her. From what you’ve seen, do you think she places a lot of trust in conventional relationships?”

“…No.”

“We all see her as an individual, and we follow her because we respect who she is as a person. I don’t serve her because she’s royalty. It’s fine to respect her position and give her your loyalty as a subject. But you also need to see her as *her*.”

“I see…”

“If you insist on sticking to a master–subject relationship, you’ll

only hurt her. Please try to remember that. That's why Tilty is angry. Because she's Lady Anis's friend."

"Don't put words in my mouth, Lainie," Tilty muttered, reaching out to grab me by the cheeks.

"Argh!"

Her pinch hurt, but I could hardly let go of the Airbike, so I just had to endure it.

Navre heaved a deep sigh. A visible crease had emerged between his eyebrows. "…That will be very difficult for me."

"It might look easy to build a relationship with someone, but it can be challenging, too," I told him. "Lady Anis is complicated, in many ways. I think you should just be honest with your feelings, Master Navre. You want to serve her as royalty, and you want her to trust you and act properly."

"…That's what I've been saying."

"That all comes from your sense of duty. That's why Lady Anis doesn't like it. If it came from your heart, I'm sure she would hear you out."

"…So that's it."

"If you want to get through to her, be open about how you feel," Tilty added. "She tends to keep her distance from people when she doesn't understand their thoughts or feelings."

Navre fell silent again, breaking into a stern frown at our explanations. I felt a little sorry for him, but he had to figure out a way to work with Lady Anis.

After all, she was a great individual, but she wasn't without her flaws.

She had a vulnerable side, so we all needed to know how best to support her. I hoped that Navre would find his own answer.

I wonder if they're all right down there…?

The forest below was eerily quiet. The wind was all we could hear.

* * *

"Achoo!"

"Are you cold, Lady Anis?" Garkie asked, worried.

"A little. The rainy season only just ended, so it's a bit chilly out here," I answered, squinting as I glanced farther into the woodland.

I felt my expression hardening as we delved deeper into Filwach Forest.

"…Lady Anis? Is everything okay?" Garkie must have noticed my heightened caution, as his tone had taken on a serious note.

"Do you want to know what I really think?"

"Please. I'm probably thinking the same thing…"

"It's *really* creepy in here."

"Tell me about it…"

We exchanged glances to make sure that we had both sensed it.

"I'm not surprised those adventurers were scared out of their wits," Garkie said. "This place is spooky."

"It's unnaturally quiet," I nodded. "I can't sense any living creatures at all. Not one…"

"Forget about monsters, I haven't seen any birds or beasts, either. It's hard to believe we're actually *in* a forest…"

Yes, we had both sensed this unnatural quiet. It was clearly *wrong*, somehow.

There were no animals. Not even any birds. There were lingering traces of life here once, but too much time had passed to figure out where it had all gone. This place was supposed to be abundant in greenery and wildlife, but the only discernible noise was the swaying of trees in the wind.

It was like every last living thing had somehow vanished, and my feeling of foreboding was stronger than ever.

"This also isn't the calm before a stampede, right?" Garkie asked.

"No. It's more difficult to make sense of—and more ominous, to say the least. *Something* is definitely happening here, but I've never seen or heard of anything like this before."

"…What should we do? Shall we send up a signal and turn back?"

"…I want to go a little farther in. Hopefully we can find some clues as to what's behind all this, at least."

I'd promised Navre that we wouldn't wander too far into the forest, but if we failed to turn up anything, I wouldn't be able to shake my anxiety. I felt a little guilty about it, but I decided to keep going. Garkie was by my side.

But there was still no sign of any animals or birds. It was simply quiet. The sound of our footsteps as we walked reverberated like thunderclaps.

“Why does it feel so *weird*, though?” Garkie asked.

“I don’t know. That’s what worries me.”

“Right… If the animals and monsters had been attacked or driven away, there ought to be *some* sign of the disturbance.”

“But there’s nothing. I can’t even think of any monsters that could have done this. It’s unsettling. If we could find *something* to explain all this, at least I wouldn’t feel so on edge.”

We continued to push ahead.

Garkie was right. How could *everything* have vanished, without leaving so much as a trace?

It was like they had just been just living their lives, until one day, they were spirited away en masse…

At that moment, I stopped in my tracks. A distant scent was tickling my nose.

“Lady Anis?”

“Quiet, Garkie,” I whispered.

He was confused, but he obeyed.

I concentrated on the smell and recognized it as blood. It was so faint that I had to wonder whether someone was deliberately trying to hide it.

I tried to follow the trail, and Garkie did his best to move as quietly as possible. He soon noticed it, too.

We had to walk for some time, but we did eventually come across the source.

“…Wh-what the hell is this?”

“This is awful…”

What we found could only be described as barbaric.

It was the corpse of a monster, violently torn to shreds. It had been devoured, with those parts that the perpetrator deemed inedible casually discarded.

“What a mess. Whatever did this ate everything it could and left the rest…”

And there was something else bothering me. The remains of the monster’s body had been burned to a crisp.

I couldn’t tell whether these burns had been the cause of death or occurred after its death. In any case, I wasn’t familiar with any monsters that displayed this sort of behavior.

“Cooking its prey before consuming it? That sounds almost human…,” I wondered aloud.

“…Are there any monsters like that?” Garkie asked.

“None that I can think of.”

This was definitely an unusual situation. I set about looking for further clues when I sensed it—a prickling, as if a fire had been lit on the nape of my neck.

Something wanted me dead.

My body reacted immediately, drawing the Celestial and bracing myself.

“Lady Anis! Watch out!” Garkie cried.

At that moment, something came flying for me, forcing me to shield myself with the Celestial.

It was a stone, about the size of a human fist. It bounced along the ground, radiating enough heat to scorch the leaves of nearby bushes.

What on earth could have thrown that rock? I turned in the direction from which it had come.

The next moment, a figure emerged from the depths of the forest—a man with bull-like horns protruding from his head.

With his ultra-muscular physique, he didn’t look at all like an ordinary person—but even more startling was the fact that his body was shrouded in flames.

“What the…?!”

“He’s too humanlike to be a monster… Is that a demi-human?!”

“Augh, aaauuuggghhh!” the figure roared.

Garkie and I stared.

As the cry rattled in our heads—a disorderly mixture of grief, wrath, and malice—the heat swelled even higher. It would probably burn my lungs if I breathed it in too deeply.

With a scream that shook the air, the flaming demi-human swung his fists my way. I quickly backed away, keeping my distance while Garkie stepped forward to shield me.

The burning creature flailed his arms and made contact with Garkie’s sword. A high-pitched, metallic screech rang through the trees.

“Whoa…! This guy’s powerful!” Garkie cried, stumbling back from the unexpected impact.

The demi-human wasn’t about to let that opportunity pass, launching a powerful kick for his target’s gut.

Garkie quickly leaped back to parry the blow—but as he moved away, the demi-human shifted his attention back to me.

“Haah…!”

I deployed my magic sword, moving to cut the creature down. The blade rapidly dispelled the flames and sank into my attacker's arm. I tried to follow through and completely dismember the limb, but the resistance was too strong.

"Lady Anis!"

"Garkie! Signal Tilty and the others!" I instructed as I pushed back against the creature.

Without wasting a moment, Garkie released three magic shots into the sky—the emergency signal that we had agreed on before setting out. Tilty and the others would know to hurry down.

"Gaaauuuggghhh!"

The flames roiling from the creature's body swelled once more as if to rip me apart, and a new burst of heat exploded outward.

I wouldn't be able to cut through his arms, I realized. Instead, I kicked the deformed figure in the stomach. I risked burning myself, but it was my only chance to fall back.

The man-creature staggered, but he quickly found his stance again, flailing his fists at me.

"Why, you…!"

I swung the Celestial around to defend myself against the oncoming fist, and while my blade cut easily through the flames, the arm stopped it again.

But my attacker didn't emerge unscathed. Blood gushed from his wound, and the force of my blow had alarmed him. He leaped backward.

"…So hot…!" I gasped.

Those flames engulfed the man head to toe, so I couldn't get too close.

I had to keep my distance, but the figure was fast and incredibly agile. Those flames had to be the result of some kind of magical effect, but even when I dispelled the magic with my sword, his body was tough enough to withstand the attack.

…*He is going to be a pain…*

But no enemy was invincible. If I unleashed more of my dragon power, maybe that would do the trick! It would probably also help to boost the strength of my blade enough to deal real damage.

This was one inexplicable opponent, but I would have to deal with him first and get some answers later. With that in mind, I readied the Celestial.

All of a sudden, a voice pierced the air.

“Oh, this won’t do. Not at all. This prey is mine.”

Letting my intuition guide me, I leaped backward a good distance to a safe vantage point.

The next moment, a gigantic snake slithered out from amid the trees, turning its head to the deformed figure and coiling around him.

“A-aaauuuggghhh!”

The man struggled to free himself, but the snake only tightened its grip.

After a moment, a woman emerged from the shadows of the trees. Her long blue hair and crimson eyes possessed a bewitching light, while her faint smile was no less mesmerizing.

“She’s controlling the monster…?!” Garkie exclaimed.

“Oh-ho-ho… Now this is a quandary.” The woman chuckled. “I came here only to collect my prey… So how about we pretend this never happened?”

Her facial expressions remained unchanged, but the light hidden in her shockingly red eyes grew in intensity.

A wave of unease fell over me—a kind that I was well acquainted with. She was attempting to alter our perceptions in some way.

“Garkie! She’s trying to charm you! Don’t make eye contact!”

“G-got it!”

A charm ability. I had experienced it many times now with Lainie, though this one was especially unpleasant.

Garkie must have sensed it for himself, as he shook his head in an effort to regain control of his senses. He, however, was unable to fully withstand its effects, and so he ended up shielding his eyes with one hand.

Those crimson eyes, with their bewitching gleam and their ability to ensnare those who looked into them… In other words, this woman could only be one thing.

“Lady Anis! What’s going on?!” a voice called from overhead, interrupting my thoughts.

Tilty, Lainie, and Navre quickly descended on their Airbikes to join us.

“What in the world…?!”

“Be careful! That woman is a vampire! And she can manipulate monsters!”

“A vampire?!” Navre startled, bracing himself as he fixed the woman with a glare.

Tilty’s expression turned grim, while Lainie stared back at the vampire in astonishment.

“Who are you people? How do you know about vampires? And those mysterious vehicles of yours…” The woman’s smile vanished as she watched us suspiciously.

Her eyes lit up, however, the minute she spotted Lainie.

“…Tiris? No, you’re someone else… But you look just like her…”

“Huh…? You know my mother?!”

“…Your mother? Oh? Ho-ho-ho, ha-ha-ha! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

The woman choked on her laughter. When finally she managed to catch her breath, she stared at Lainie. The pressure in her gaze was so strong, Lainie had to take a step back.

“Tiris had a daughter?! That traitor?! Yes, you’re hers, all right! No wonder you know about vampires!”

“T-traitor…?”

“Yes indeed! A betrayer, irredeemable! An eccentric! An idiot! And so pitiful! And you’re hers, daughter to that wretched fool!”

The way the woman’s eyes moved, taking everything in while remaining utterly composed, was bizarre, almost uncanny—as if looking *at* us, but not *seeing* us.

The mood was so heavy that none of us dared make a sound.

“I’m curious about those tools of yours as well. Yes, yes indeed. Then perhaps I’ll help you? Daughter of Tiris, child of that wretched, hopeless traitor—why don’t you come with me?”

Huh…?”

“You know nothing, you poor thing. We’ll forgive you. We’ll *save* you. So, come with me.”

“Wh-what are you talking about?! My mother was no traitor!”

“Oh, but she was! A fool who turned her back on our noble mission! You don’t even understand what I mean, do you? You poor soul. Is that why you’ve joined these humans?”

The vampire woman continued her display of grief, as if she had just witnessed a terrible tragedy. It was clear from the way she was talking to Lainie that she didn’t like any of us.

“…Sounds like you’re not fond of humans. Do you expect us to just do what you say?” I interjected.

Having regained her composure, the vampire woman flashed us

a soft grin and lifted her hands to her cheeks.

"Oh, fear not. Your pitiful lives are in safe hands. I will take you mercifully."

The vampire woman's shadow undulated and shimmered—and a huge *thing* emerged behind her.

With a sickening squelching sound, a bloody lump of flesh took shape at her back, like dough being kneaded.

"What…?!"

"She's summoning monsters from her own flesh…?!"

Wriggling and writhing, the creature—no, *creatures*—peeled themselves away from the vampire woman.

They all had crimson eyes, all of them turning with vacant stares to take us in.

"Now, you too shall join us!"

It was a bizarre sight. The monsters that spawned from the vampire woman's body stared at us.

Their eyes were hollow, while the woman's smile was ecstatic as she roused her horde of grotesque minions.

I had already cut down the first wave with my sword, but there was no end to them.

"Everyone! Fall back!" I ordered.

"Lady Anis?!"

"Take care of the monsters! I'll deal with her!"

After all, we were facing a vampire. Only Lainie and I could resist her powers of enchantment, which meant that only we could properly face her. Garkie and Navre would simply be overwhelmed.

"Do you intend to slay me?" the vampire woman called out. That mysterious light behind her eyes flickered at me. "Do you really think yourself *capable* of slaying me?"

"Of course I am!" I cried back.

"Huh?"

Shaking off her attempt to bewitch me, I leaped forward—watching as her eyes widened in shock.

She was so confident and self-assured that she made no effort to defend herself as I lashed out with my sword. Fresh blood danced through the air.

"Wh-what?! Nggghhh?! Ow, ow, ow! That hurt!"

The woman screamed at the top of her lungs, clutching the wound stretching all the way across her chest.

I would have delivered a second strike if not for the swarms of monsters moving to block my way, forcing me to retreat and adopt a defensive stance.

"Tilty! Navre!"

"I know, I know! Navre?"

"Understood!"

I could first hear Lainie, then the others behind me. Tilty reached out with her shadow to ensnare the monsters, while Navre quickly dispatched those trying to escape with his wind magic.

Lainie and Garkie were busy dealing the final blows to those that had been stopped in their tracks.

They were both covered in blood, their faces and clothes smeared with crimson. And yet…

"Damn it! They just keep on coming!"

"We never defeated them in the first place! They're regenerating!"

"Then focus on tying them down! Keep them from moving!"

"Lady Tilty! Whatever you do, don't lose your head!" Lainie said with a stern glare.

A dangerous glint had appeared in Tilty's eyes, as if she was on the verge of unleashing her magic.

Tilty shook her head from side to side, struggling to hold herself together.

"Ugh, I feel *awful*, forcing myself to hold back…!" she called out. "I won't be able to keep it in for long, Anis!"

"I know!"

I turned my attention back to the vampire, searching for some way out of this situation.

My last attack must have dealt a deep wound, but it was already healing. Judging by the expression that had fallen over her face, I had angered her.

"You've done it now, human! Stop this futile resistance and become one with us!"

"There's so much I want to ask you," I answered. "You're a vampire, which means you won't die easily. If you're going to give up, I'd love it if you could go ahead and do that now."

"Don't you dare mock me! Go forth and attack!"

Part of the vampire woman's body swelled again as a humanoid monster practically crawled out from her flesh.

Though taken aback by this sight, that didn't stop me from lashing out reflexively. I sliced the creature clean in two, but it reattached its own parts at incredible speed as it closed in on me.

"It's useless! Useless, you hear?! This is our power! We're one, and we're immortal! Nothing you do can threaten us!"

"…You're collecting demi-humans? Using them like monsters?"

"Yes! All of creation is to kneel before us and be blessed!"

"Blessed…?"

"With eternal life! To enter a paradise of the whole! To realize an ideal beyond the realm of lowly mortals! Me! Us! She who

leads!”

The vampire spoke as though addressing someone else. In the meantime, the soulless demi-humans continued to regenerate and attack us.

I couldn’t sense a shred of independent willpower in any of them. They were merely puppets.

“…This is your *ideal world*?” I challenged.

“Of course! With this power, with *you*, we will fulfill our great desire! We will have revenge against the cursed Kingdom of Palettia that denied and persecuted our ancestors!”

How many demi-humans would I have to cut down as they swarmed around me? There seemed to be no way out.

At that moment, another monster spawned from the woman’s back—the same serpent that had captured the strange demi-human from before.

The snake glared my way, its tongue flicking between its lips. Its jaw opened wide, attempting to swallow both me and the vampire’s own demi-humans.

“So this is your way of doing things?” I called, kicking away the serpent and delivering a heavy blow.

The demi-humans weren’t so lucky. Fresh blood splashed across the dirt as the serpent crushed them between its fangs.

“All life will be bound to us! Only then will the true, eternal kingdom be complete! This is the path of eternal happiness, the truth underlying magic itself!”

The vampire wore an ecstatic grin. Her euphoria was almost intoxicating, like a spell falling over us.

But I only breathed a disappointed sigh. “And to think, if I had slipped up, I might have ended up just like you…”

“…Oh?”

I didn’t know precisely how, but this vampire woman had some means of *assimilating* monsters into herself. Once they were hers, she could regenerate their wounds and use them as she pleased.

I doubted that those monsters under her command were even alive anymore. They were practically extensions of the vampire herself, and they could be discarded without qualms like strands of hair or half-bitten nails.

It was disgusting. I felt sick just thinking about it. Her total disregard for life was an abomination.

But was I any different? From ether drugs made from magicite

to Impressed Seals comprised of dragon essence, I had collected plenty of monster materials for my magical tools.

Was I monstrous as well? Was I toying with the lives of others?

But despite that incessant doubt, I knew one thing for certain—I didn't want to become like her.

No matter how similar our paths were, that was one line I refused to cross.

This repulsion, I hoped, was proof enough that I was still human.

And it was why I couldn't forgive the being in front of me.

"Aerial System: Dragon Heart."

Pouring magical energy through my Impressed Seal, I drew on my dragon magic as I readied my blade, which shifted color. I glared at the vampire woman.

She took a step back in disbelief. She was either intimidated by the force of my stare or else overwhelmed by the sight of my dragon magic.

"I know the Kingdom of Palettia persecuted your ancestors as heretics," I said to her. "But your ancestors weren't wrong."

"Wh-what…what *are* you?!"

"My name is Anisphia Wynn Palettia. I'm a princess of the same kingdom that banished your ancestors."

"A princess…?! What would a *princess* be doing in the middle of these woods?! No, no—this is providence reaching out! I can't allow you to leave now! This will be a momentous leap forward in our great journey! Atone for your sins, Princess of Palettia!"

Confusion, hatred, joy—the woman's expression shifted through a dizzying array of emotions.

As she lost herself in those emotions, she set her horde of monsters against me. "Attack!"

I struck down every last one of the creatures surging forward. It wasn't enough just to cut them down—I was forced to eviscerate them and send the pieces flying into the air.

Fresh blood and gore fell like raindrops as I closed in on the vampire woman.

"No! How can you stop that many of them?! What powers do you possess?!"

This time, the vampire moved only with the intention of defending herself.

I ignored her question and struck at her arm.

“Ngh?! Gah! W-we can’t be stopped by the likes of—”

“Don’t think you can rely on your regenerative abilities to defeat me,” I interrupted, striking her with my fist, which was reinforced with an excess of magical power.

The strike knocked her backward—but I wasn’t finished.

Cut, crush, cleave. Without pausing to catch my breath, I sliced away at my opponent. But no matter how many times I hit her, she continued to heal herself.

“Gah! Ngh! Ugh! Gyagh! Argh?!”

Perhaps because she was falling back on her regenerative powers, her movements had become dull and sluggish. She desperately shielded her heart and head while I continued my onslaught.

No doubt her magicite was located near her heart, and if she sustained a severe enough injury to her head, she would probably die before her regenerative abilities could kick in.

Then there was only one thing left for me to do—I had to choose one and attack it with all my strength.

“Agh! Wh-what are you all doing?!” she called to her monsters. “Kill this fiendish princess, quickly!”

The vampire woman let out an ear-rending shriek as she moved to protect her vital organs.

At the same time, the monsters tried to throw themselves around her—only for Garkie and Lainie to mow them down before they could make it.

“Not a chance!”

“I don’t think so! Water Lance!”

Garkie slashed away at the nearby creatures, while Lainie’s water spell created spears that pinned them to the ground.

Behind them, I could see Tilty and Navre likewise fighting to stop the monsters in their tracks. Now that our opponent and her monsters were focused on me, the others were free to move unimpeded.

But we weren’t the only ones.

“Aaauuuggghhh!”

“Wh-what?! What now?!”

The aberrant demi-human, the one covered in flames, had

likewise been freed from the serpent. He lashed out and tore at it—and then his attention turned to me.

I quickly braced myself, but it was the vampire woman he was truly after.

"Aaauuuggghhh!"

"Gyah! S-stop…! Ah!"

After delivering a powerful punch to the pit of her stomach, he lifted her into the air with just one hand. Flames engulfed the vampire woman, strong enough to reduce her to ash.

"L-let go of me! Put me down! Argh! It—burns!"

As she shrieked, the demi-human clenched his teeth.

"Give…them…back…," he growled.

"Eh…?"

"My…friends… Give…them…baaack!"

He struggled to form the words, but his cries were filled with helpless anger and grief. My sympathy for his pain almost knocked me off my feet. His screams were so earnest it was almost unbearable.

Something glistened as it ran down the demi-human's cheek—a tear. It quickly evaporated, however, thanks to the flames around him.

"Aaarrrggghhh!" the vampire screamed. "Wh-why are you…?! Wh-why me…?! Ah, someone, please, *save meee*…! Lilanaaa!"

She was pleading for help, even calling out someone's name—yet that didn't stop the demi-human from impaling her through the chest with his bare hands.

A distinctive crack could be heard from the arm protruding from her back.

Her eyes opened wide one final time. Then, with a weak shudder, she slumped down.

The demi-human must have destroyed the magicite next to her heart. That confirmed it—she *was* a vampire. Without lowering my guard, I peered across at her.

The demi-human pulled his arm from her corpse, and his flames grew in an effort to incinerate her.

But before her body had fully ignited—a violent spasm coursed through her as blood spurted from her back.

That blood began to coalesce into a slimy, gooey mass, stretching out into countless tentacle-like appendages.

"Wh-what's going on?!"

“Everyone, get back!” I called out.

I had no way of knowing what this was, but I had a bad feeling about it.

Upon hearing my warning, Garkie and Lainie retreated to a safe distance.

As I caught up to them, I turned around to watch as those gory tentacles skewered the monsters that she had taken to serve her.

The next moment, the monsters melted, losing their shape as they were absorbed into the bloody appendages and returned to the woman’s body.

“Wh-what…?! What *is* that?!”

The woman should have been an unmoving corpse, but her body continued to quiver. And the tremors were growing stronger by the minute.

All at once, her swaying head came to a standstill, and her lightless eyes stared back at the strange demi-human.

Then, her flesh swelled like a balloon on the verge of bursting.

No description could do justice to what happened next—it was too grotesque.

It was an extraordinary sight—her flesh puffing up and transforming into *something else*.

With each ghastly swell, it came closer to us. I quickly backed up in an effort to maintain my distance, but I couldn’t take my eyes off what was happening before me.

The demi-human beside her continued to burn the body as he pulled at something inside it.

In the meantime, the bloated flesh began to settle down. I could only stare back in mute silence.

Until just a few moments ago, the body had still resembled a person—now, it was no more than a lump of meat shaped like a small mountain. Countless heads protruded from it, each of them different.

There were wolves, birds, snakes—so many creatures, all of them seemingly having been fused together.

On closer inspection, other *shapes* seemed to have failed to take proper form. There were masses resembling arms, legs, faces, and other half-formed lumps of flesh trembling as if to insist that they were still alive.

There weren’t just beasts among that chaotic mass of body parts —I could spot human organs, too.

I couldn't speak. Disgust and dread had seized control of my vocal cords. I couldn't even call the sight what it was—abject horror. My whole being wanted to reject the gruesome spectacle that I was presently witnessing.

It couldn't possibly be alive. It was too horrifying. It didn't belong in this world.

It's almost like one of those chimeras…

Among my memories from my previous life was a fantasy being—though I didn't recall them being as unspeakable as this.

"_____!"

All at once, its many heads cried out in unison—a deafening, dissonant cacophony.

Just hearing those screams filled me with dread. I wanted to block my ears, to scream back at the top of my lungs and flee as fast as my feet could carry me.

"Wh-what the…?! Ugh! I feel terrible!" Garkie moaned, grimacing.

"L-Lady Anis! Don't listen to it! That voice will manipulate your thoughts…!" Lainie cried out.

"What?!"

I couldn't conceal my shock. So even dead, her vampire powers were still active?! Or had she somehow managed to survive in that ghastly form?!

I gritted my teeth in an effort to withstand it—when I heard a scream.

Tilty.

Her face was pale, her knees trembling as she clutched her head in her hands.

"Tilty?!"

"U-ugh, m-my head… It's like it's breaking apart… Stop it! I don't want to hear…that voice! Shut up, shut up, get out of my skull! No, no, nooo!"

"Lady Tilty! Cover your ears!" Navre tried to help her up, but Tilty continued to scream and flail like a child throwing a tantrum.

Her face was contorted with fear—which would have been unthinkable if she was in her right mind.

"Lainie—protect Tilty! Navre, Garkie—fall back!"

"Princess Anisphia?! B-but—" Navre started to protest.

"You're in my way! Get back!" I interrupted.

Anyone at the mercy of a vampire's mental interference would

be unable to make full use of their skills and abilities.

Tilty was particularly vulnerable, which explained her reaction. But Navre and Garkie weren't faring so well, either.

If I had to worry about them, I wouldn't be able to concentrate on the fight. It was best that they kept their distance for now.

Activating the Celestial's magical blade, I struck at the chimera. At the very same moment, the creature began to move, its countless heads extending to attack.

"This is *disgusting*!"

Extending the length of my sword, I swung to decapitate as many of them as I could.

I faced little resistance as a mess of body parts tumbled to the ground, but a moment later—they slithered back to the mass of flesh.

"How can they regenerate so quickly?!"

Once more, the heads lunged toward me—but just before I could intercept them, they were engulfed in flames.

"Aaauuuggghhh!" the demi-human roared.

The cry shook me to the core; the heat was so strong that it almost seared my skin. Another wave of emotion washed over me, this one even more powerful than before.

There was wrath. There was grief. And above all, there was malice. The demi-human screamed into the heavens as he charged at his foe.

The flames were more than that now—they were heat rays, penetrating the chimera's flesh all the way through.

"Hold on, you'll burn the whole mountain down…! No, wait!" I shouted.

Then, in the chimera's profile as it burned, I realized something.

There was no sign that the creature was about to regenerate its wounds, or that new heads would soon be popping out.

This was my chance. After all, the problem with this opponent was its impossible powers of regeneration.

The demi-human might not be an ally, but I could use him to break the stalemate.

He continued his assault on the chimera—and holes were beginning to emerge across its body.

The chimera shook, bundling tails into a huge serpent. Then with one swift, quick bite, the serpent bit off its own body to free itself.

“Huh?!” I exclaimed.

The seared surface of the chimera began to regenerate, as if time were reversing before my eyes.

It had been almost embers just moments ago, but now it was restored as if nothing at all had happened.

“Oh, come on…!”

This time, the chimera ignored me. Focusing exclusively on the demi-human, it launched countless beast heads toward him all at once.

Though the demi-human resisted, it wasn’t long before he was overwhelmed by his foe’s regenerative powers and sheer force of numbers.

He would burn various appendages to cinders, and the chimera would bite down on its own flesh to restore itself. Again and again, the cycle continued.

Something told me I was going to have nightmares about this scene…

Meanwhile, the chimera continued to change, its fleshy mountain-like body trembling as yet more bestial heads popped out.

Then, it started lashing out at Lainie and the others, too.

“I don’t think so!”

I attacked with my magic-infused sword, but against those numbers, it was like pouring water on top of molten rocks. I couldn’t land any kind of decisive blow.

Meanwhile, the chimera closed in on the others. Garkie placed himself in the creature’s path, but there was little that he could hope to accomplish.

“Navre!” he called out. “Back me up!”

“On it!”

Navre rushed forward to bolster Garkie’s defense, but their movements were more sluggish than usual.

It wasn’t long before the two were headbutted out of the way as the chimera surged toward Lainie and Tilty.

Lainie summoned pillars of water from the ground in an effort to halt its approach, but the heads must have found a gap in her defenses. They were still closing in.

“Lainie! Tilty!” I cried out.

The bestial heads rushed toward them, gnashing their teeth. But just before it could reach them—something intervened.

“…Huh?”

The demi-human had rushed to protect them, using himself as a shield.

Blood splattered through the air as the creature's many fangs tore through his flesh. The heads seemed intent on devouring him.

The demi-human, however, stood his ground in front of Lainie and Tilty.

Slowly, his flames began to ebb, and he staggered backward.

Nonetheless, he persevered, as if he planned to tear those bestial heads from the mound of flesh. He didn't seem to care for his injuries. He was so badly hurt that he could barely stand, but he still shielded Lainie and Tilty.

"…Wh-why…?" Lainie murmured, taken aback by this development.

Perhaps the demi-human had heard her, or maybe he needed to reassure himself. In any event, as he stepped forward, I could make out a low, distant voice, almost too quiet to hear:

"Pro…tect… Have…to…pro…tect…!"

Protect. He was repeating that word over and over with every step he took.

His flames continued to roll back, revealing an increasingly human figure. The demi-human was fearless, his eyes locked on the chimera in challenge.

As if thrown into a rage by the scent of blood, the chimera's heads swarmed around him. But they were all sheared from the gory body before they could reach him.

"Not today, you abomination!"

"On my honor as a knight, I'll bring an end to this!"

Crying out in rage, both Garkie and Navre hewed the creature's heads off one at a time.

The chimera's cry had stunned them a short moment ago, and neither could muster their full strength. But now, fueled by their anger, their attacks were unceasing.

All the same, the chimera continued to regenerate after each blow, mocking their show of defiance.

"Damn…you! Damn you to hell!"

"I won't stand for this!"

Garkie and Navre were shouting furiously. I could hear their

frustration at their lack of strength, their inexperience, their futile rage and indignation.

"L-Lady Anis!" Lainie shouted. Tilty was still trembling in her arms.

…I know.

"Leave it to me."

I would have to slay it. Determined, I rushed at the chimera.

The magical blade of the Celestial darkened in color, its light solidifying and sending a resonant crystalline sound emanating through the forest.

"—!!"

The chimera flung its limbs out haphazardly in an effort to skewer me, but I cut them down as I closed the distance.

Apparently deducing that I posed it the greatest threat, the chimera cast its tentacles to hem me in, blocking any potential escape route—then sent them flying at me all at once.

"Dragon Claw."

In my free hand, I concentrated my dragon magic into a powerful claw.

That talon, imbued with magical energy, tore through the chimera's tentacles and obliterated them on impact.

Once I'd torn through the encirclement, I leaped into the air and landed atop the chimera's body, thrusting my crystallized sword down as hard as I could.

The Celestial passed through the mass of flesh like a lance piercing a boil.

With each stab, a flood of magical energy came pouring out from the chimera. Again and again, I impaled the creature, holding on as hard as I could while letting loose with my magic so as not to lose consciousness.

I was trying to hit the magicite somewhere deep in its body—but the chimera kept on raging and writhing, infuriated by the dragon magic tearing through its flesh.

Resisting, the chimera sent its own magical energy pushing back against me, but still I held fast to the Celestial. Though I was starting to feel faint, I had managed to locate the magicite.

"Found you!"

I knew what I had to do. The magicite had to be destroyed in one fell swoop so as not to give it any chance to regenerate. I poured my magical energy into the crystalline blade of the Celestial,

extending it as far as it needed.

But the weapon couldn't maintain this form forever—and indeed, it had already begun to return to blinding, ethereal light.

"Aaarrrggghhh!"

The magical blade spread through the chimera's body like a tree taking root, slicing it from the inside out as the creature wailed in agony.

Naturally, it resisted. The branching blades, however, spread through its many tentacles, curtailing its movements.

The recoil sent pain coursing throughout my body, but I gritted my teeth and kept on pushing.

Then, at last, my attack reached a turning point, the glow filling the creature's body from inside bursting outward.

"Return to the light!"

As I cried out, my magical sword exploded within the monster.

The impact propagated through every corner of the chimera's body, its every appendage bursting in a chain of explosions. For a moment, everything was dyed white as the potent wave of magical energy broke from its crystalline bounds, blossoming outward.

Engulfed in that white light, the chimera was obliterated without a trace.

Though the burst of energy flung me back, I rode the shock wave and landed firmly on my feet. The next moment, however, my knees gave way, and I fell flat to my hands.

"Phew… Ah, that was rough…"

It had taken considerable focus and magical energy to send my attack throughout the chimera's entire body, but hopefully that would finally be enough to destroy its magicite once and for all.

If it still managed to regenerate after all that, I would be out of ideas. I stared at the at the place where it had just been standing, whispering a silent prayer.

But the chimera was gone, leaving only a dark blotch on the forest floor, as if someone had gouged the earth out with a spoon. There was nothing to suggest that it was regenerating again.

Once I was sure, I was able to breathe a sigh of relief.

"Aaauuuggghhh…!"

Caught off guard, I spun around to see the demi-human wailing

into the sky.

Tears spilled from his eyes. His face appeared distorted in rage at first—but he was just weeping.

We could only watch.

"…Aaauuuggghhh…"

Eventually, his cries softened, like a fire slowly being extinguished. Just before he could collapse to the ground, Garkie rushed in to support him. Garkie's expression was grim, his teeth tightly clenched.

I could understand why. With those wounds…the demi-human was beyond saving. We could all see that.

What was I supposed to say? The silence was deafening.

"…Can you hear me?" I asked. I scolded my trembling legs and forced myself to face the demi-human.

As he turned his gaze to me, his eyes seemed almost vacant.

Was that because he was on the cusp of death, or because the vampire was gone? He seemed strangely calm now.

At the very least, I wanted him to know how grateful I was.

"Thank you for protecting Lainie and Tilty," I said.

The demi-human stared back at me for a while, then slowly turned to Garkie, supporting him, then Lainie and the others standing nearby.

He let out a deep breath. "Thank…you…," he said with a gentle smile.

His words were broken, his voice so inaudible it might disappear at any moment.

What was he thanking us for? But I didn't have time to ask him exactly what he meant.

The demi-human placed a hand against his chest—and before I knew what was happening, he plunged it in.

We all stared in shock at this self-inflicted wound—when he pulled his hand back out.

There was a red-stained piece of magicite.

Blood dripped down from the open wound, but the demi-human held the magicite out, his expression that of a man who had finally found peace.

"…You want me to take it?" I asked in a trembling voice.

The demi-human gave me a small nod.

Fighting to calm my shaking hands, I accepted his offering.

"…Be one with the Great Current," he whispered.

The Great Current. If I had to guess, perhaps he followed a way of life similar to Acryl's.

The piece of magicite felt awfully heavy as I took it in my hands.

Why had he entrusted it to me?

How could he remain so calm when death was calling for him?

I didn't have any answers. Even if I wanted to know, there was no way for me to find out.

But I had to say *something*.

"Your life will return to the Great Current. So be at peace."

Was that the right thing to say? I had no way of knowing for sure, but the demi-human opened his eyes slightly before closing them again with a gratified look.

Gently, Garkie laid him to rest. After staring down at him for a long, drawn-out moment, he slammed his fist hard into the ground.

"…Gark?"

"…We don't know the first thing about this guy. So why…? Why is it so hard to let him go…?!" he shouted. Navre was similarly conflicted.

In fact, none of us had the words for this situation, and the forest, too, descended back into silence. In the end, only the scars of the tragedy were left behind, as if it was all no more than a passing dream.

CHAPTER 5
A Budding Emergency

I—Euphyllia Fez Palettia—felt alone without my familiar source of warmth by my side.

Glancing up at the night sky as the moon rose overhead, I breathed a sigh. The day had passed so quickly, yet it seemed to grind to a halt when I had nothing to occupy me.

It was obvious enough why I felt this way. No doubt because the person I wanted wasn't lying next to me.

"…Anis," I breathed, whispering the name of my beloved.

But there was no response.

Even I recognized how she had become like an obsession to me, but that knowledge didn't make it any easier.

On nights like this, I felt so lonely that I couldn't sleep.

It was while in this state that I heard a soft knock at the door.

"Come in," I called out.

"Excuse me, Lady Euphyllia," Ilia said as she stepped foot into the room.

In her hands, she was holding a tray with an assortment of necessities for preparing tea.

"We've both had a hard day, haven't we, Ilia?"

"You must be exhausted, Lady Euphyllia. Allow me to brew you a cup of tea."

"Yes, that would be wonderful."

Sharing a cup of tea with Ilia—yes, that would help bring some comfort.

Without Anis, my days barely tasted like anything. But I still had others to support me.

Halphys was helping out as my assistant in Lainie's absence, while Marion paid me regular visits from the Ministry of the Arcane. On top of that, my stepfather and stepmother continued to advise me on a great many things. Yes, I had so many people whom I could trust and rely on. Yet my heart continued to ache in Anis's absence.

The constant work did help me forget my worries, and I was even thankful for my father's reckless actions each time he visited.

…But I couldn't afford to hold onto familial affection. I had almost allowed myself to bond with him—I was too weak not to—and that was something that I couldn't possibly allow in my new position.

"Here you go, Lady Euphyllia."

"Thank you, Ilia. Take a seat."

"Very well."

We sat down over tea, each of us bringing our cup to our lips at the same time.

Relishing the scent and mellow taste, I sighed. I loved silent moments together like this. It was a chance for me to catch my breath.

Of course, it helped that it was Ilia sitting with me. Since becoming queen, I had learned just how precious it was having someone to whom you could entrust your innermost thoughts.

I quietly sipped my drink, watching her. She remained as calm and as collected as ever, but I could sense something different about her in the small details of her mannerisms and bearing.

"You look tired, Ilia."

"…Is it that obvious?"

"No. Your makeup is a little heavier than usual today, that's all. I'm sure most people wouldn't notice."

"…Please forgive my sloppiness."

"There's no need for that. I know how difficult this must be for you, Ilia. It's hard when you don't feel up to meeting new people."

At present, we were working to bring more maids into the detached palace's regular staff.

Originally, Ilia alone had managed the household affairs. While she now had Lainie on hand to assist her, I was calling her away with increasing frequency to advise me.

Until now, there had only really been the four of us, so Ilia might have been expected to manage alone.

But our situation had changed. Anis had emerged from the shadows to assume important duties in her new royal capacity, while I had acceded to the throne as queen.

Nothing stayed the same forever. Change was inevitable. Deep down, we all understood that.

It was the same here in the detached palace. Comfortable though things were now, it was clear that our arrangements would need to evolve.

Considering all the changes still over the horizon, we would need someone to support Ilia in her work. Without help, the burden on her would simply become too great.

"We've been bringing in potential staff on shifts…but are you finding it difficult to manage?" I asked.

"It *is* daunting, to be honest…," Ilia answered with a forced, almost distracted smile.

Normally, she would never make such an expression.

"I'm not a particularly social person," she added.

"I can see that."

"You might say I was blessed, being placed in charge of Lady Anisphia. Perhaps I leaned too heavily on my good fortune, and the time has come to pay the piper."

"We couldn't possibly let you go, Ilia. Please don't worry."

"Yes, I understand. If I can't build my own staff, you'll end up needing to replace *me*. Though I would be left with nothing if it came to that…"

"If you truly can't manage, I *can* bring in someone else to manage affairs in the detached palace."

"Of course. If it comes to that, I will ask you myself."

Ilia fell silent, taking a long sip of her tea. Her soft sigh seemed to fill the room.

"…I know I'm a sorry sight, Lady Euphyllia, but I can't stop myself."

"…Ilia?"

"I've had a lot of time to reflect on my failings lately," she said, staring off into the distance.

Unsure of what to say, I settled on watching her a little longer.

After a moment, she turned my way, her expression bitter as she smiled awkwardly again. "At the beginning, I wasn't deemed worthy of serving as Lady Anisphia's personal maid. Since then, everyone around me seems to be making strides. You've become queen, while Lainie has grown immeasurably… And here I am, in the same place as ever."

"That isn't true, Ilia."

"It is. It is… I know you all need me here, but when I see you all, there are times when I feel like I can't keep my jealousy under control. More and more, lately, it seems."

"…Ilia."

"Don't you feel afraid, sometimes, Lady Euphyllia?"

"…Of what?"

"Of being left behind. I do. I'm scared that everyone else might move on, and I'll become nothing more than a memory… That thought terrifies me."

"You're worried that we'll go off somewhere without you?"

"You can't say it's beyond the realm of possibility. I've been on this world a little longer than you and the others, Lady Euphyllia." Ilia kept her tone light, but she couldn't hide the shadow that had fallen over her eyes.

Covering her face with her hands, she leaned forward, turning her head slightly. "Even if we keep going about our lives as we have…I'll no doubt be the first of us to leave this world. I dread that future. I'm just a regular human with no extraordinary gifts, while in addition to being a vampire, Lainie is blessed with talents enabling her to serve by your side."

"Ilia, you don't need to worry about that…"

"It doesn't frighten you, Lady Euphyllia? To imagine a future in which Lady Anisphia passes on before you do?"

I caught my breath at this question. I let it out slowly, smiling bitterly.

"It does, yes. It hurts to imagine such a future. But…"

"But…?"

"But I'm sure Anis wouldn't give up on me."

Maybe I sounded a little smug as I said that, but I didn't mind.

Anis loved me. I knew we'd always be connected.

It was thanks to that belief that I could contemplate a happy future, even if Ilia struggled to do the same.

If I ever felt like giving up, Anis would always be there to pull me back.

"The weight of the future is terrifying when you're in love," I began. "What might inevitably happen one day, and what you are going to do about it. We might be cruelly torn apart. After all, the future is never certain."

"…That's true."

"So if you don't want to have regrets, you need to stamp those thoughts out. Although you *do* have another option, Ilia."

"I do?"

"If you want your bond with Lainie to last an eternity, you could always ask her to turn you into a vampire."

Ilia looked up, then away again. She seemed torn.

"…I can't say I've never considered it."

"No?"

"I still don't have an answer…"

"But?"

"…It's true that I can't stop thinking about it…"

Slowly, she focused on me and smiled, but that smile was still conflicted. From another angle, her tears would have been especially easy to see.

It was the kind of smile that suggested deep pain and distress—but also relief at finding a ray of light. It was the most beautiful expression I had ever seen on her.

"I want to spend more time with you and Lady Anisphia. That's why I want to be someone capable of standing up for herself. I want to believe—truly *believe*—that I belong here."

"…There's nothing more important than that. Please, Ilia. I would like to continue to rely on you."

"Thank you… Please don't tell Lainie about all this. To be entirely honest, I wonder whether there isn't an alternative to becoming a vampire myself."

"Oh? Why is that?"

"If I become a vampire, I wouldn't be able to offer her blood anymore, would I?" she said with a mischievous grin.

I couldn't help but break out into a smile. "You truly love Lainie, don't you?"

"Just as you love Lady Anisphia."

"I see."

"…I wish I could say that I deserve her."

"Hang in there, Ilia."

Stay with us. I look forward to us spending a great many years in each other's company.

I knew that it was a cruel thing to wish for, to force this on others—I only hoped that I could be forgiven for wanting it.

* * *

Night gave way to dawn and the coming of morning.

As usual, it was time to begin another day of my political duties as queen. Ilia came to wake me, and I had to turn my attention to getting ready.

Later, while hard at work fulfilling my royal obligations in the castle, I received a visitor.

"I'll get it," Halphys offered, having temporarily taken over as my secretary in Lainie's place.

"Thank you, Halphys."

As she went to receive our guest, her voice betrayed a hint of surprise. "Oh? Ilia?"

"Ilia?" I repeated, looking up from my work.

The figure entering the room was unmistakably her. Her face was a little more tense than usual. Had something happened?

"Please forgive the intrusion, Lady Euphyllia. We've received an emergency pigeon."

"A message? Don't tell me something's happened to Anis?"

Urgent news for me? Anis's face immediately leaped to mind in my worries. I could only pray that she hadn't encountered any trouble on her trip.

Ilia shook her head, alleviating my fears. "No, it isn't from Lady Anis… It's from Master Algard."

"Algard?"

That was an unexpected name. We had agreed to keep in touch as part of our vampire investigations, but I wouldn't have expected him to reach out with an urgent alert.

Ilia handed me Algard's letter, and I rushed to check its contents. As I took in what it had to say, I gasped aloud.

"…Your Majesty?"

"Ilia, Anis's schedule has her due to return here today, yes?"

"It does. Why?"

"As soon as she arrives, she must fly directly to the eastern frontier. I will be joining her, so see to all the necessary preparations. We're needed as soon as possible."

"At the frontier? Has something happened?"

"It's a matter of great importance, one that I must see to personally. Halphys, summon my stepfather with all haste. Ask him to handle all necessary political affairs while I'm away."

"U-understood!" Halphys answered, hurrying from my office in search of the former king.

Ilia frowned with worry. "What did Master Algard say? You said it was serious…?"

"It seems that an unexpected situation has arisen on the frontier. If true, this information could prove invaluable. It all

seems to be developing faster than we imagined."

"What is?"

I took a moment to catch my breath and calm myself before responding. "The vampire situation."

"…Vampires…?"

"A vampire has crossed over the border—in flight, it seems. She was being pursued. Algard and his people have offered her their protection."

* * *

Earlier, shortly before Euphyllia received that urgent letter…

* * *

I—Acryl—breathed in a lungful of fresh forest air before slowly exhaling.

It had been raining for so very long, but the skies were finally beginning to clear.

It felt good, breathing the fresh air in a renewed forest.

"You look happy, Acryl."

"Al!"

Al had called out to me, accompanied by a group of knights and adventurers.

Ever since that boisterous, uninhibited woman—Anisphia was her name—had come to visit us, the number of people on the frontier had been increasing. According to Al, they were busy making preparations to further develop the area.

I could not grasp all the details, but I understood they wanted to safely gather the blessings of the spirits. To do that, they had to first hunt monsters.

That was why the knights and adventurers were with us. Al was leading the group on a hunt, to familiarize them all with the forest.

"Just so we're clear, we're splitting into two parties. The knights will escort the group, while the adventurers will scout on ahead," he explained. "Don't do anything to risk your lives, and if

you find yourself unable to handle any monsters, retreat, and leave them to me and the knights. There's no point throwing your lives away before we manage to bring a little more entertainment to the frontier."

"Ha-ha-ha! That's very true, Your Highness! You're a worldly man, I see!" exclaimed one of the adventurers.

"Poverty is a virtue, but people need entertainment to keep their spirits up. Besides, what use is earning money if you don't have anywhere to spend it?" Al answered.

"I couldn't have said it better myself! Good food, good wine, and good women! That's what we need more of! I'm sick and tired of all the monsters out here in these hinterlands!"

"If you wanna spend your coin, you've got to earn it first! So you'd all better earn as much as you can!"

"Gotta be ready for when this place gets a little livelier, eh?"

"You hear that, boys? Guard your lives, but earn your keep! We're gonna have ourselves one hell of a hunt today! Ready yourselves!"

The adventurers entered the forest in high spirits, their spirited shouting echoing all around me. They were so *boisterous*, so *simple*. I couldn't help but heave a sigh.

"Men are simple creatures," I remarked.

"I can't really say anything to that. You watch after yourself, too, Acryl," Al replied.

"I shall, and you as well."

Well, it was time to hunt. I would be moving alone.

It hadn't been long since I joined the people here. Yes, hunting together as a group would help create a sense of unity. At the same time, however, many people remained ill at ease around a Lycant.

It was probably better that I observed them in their everyday lives a little more before I joined them on the hunt. I had been able to talk to them a few times back at the mansion, and I had even practiced fighting without weapons. I hoped I wouldn't have to wait too much longer.

With that in mind, I made my way through the forest. I proceeded carefully, keeping watch for signs of prey and carefully searching for changes in the forest.

It all seems the same as last time… Huh?

All of a sudden, a faint scent tickled my nose.

After taking a few careful sniffs, I frowned with worry.

…Blood! Where?!

A lycant's nose is sharp, which meant that the source of the scent might yet be a long way off.

I gave the forest my full attention. Had anything changed? Then, listening carefully, I detected a faint rustling in the distance.

It was coming from the same direction as the scent of blood. And blood was not the only scent on the wind. Monsters fighting? Or fleeing? The air seemed restless.

I crouched down, then sprang upward, crossing from branch to branch as I delved deeper into the woods.

The stench of blood became thicker as I approached the signs of life—so thick that I began to feel increasingly on edge.

I hope I am wrong about this…

I swallowed, my throat suddenly dry. Then, masking my presence, I approached the source of the smell.

They were wolves, though given their huge size, they had to be monsters of some sort.

The blood-stench on these creatures was enough to make my head spin.

There had to be five, maybe six of them—each one constantly sniffing the ground as if searching for something.

I was familiar with normal wolves, but the sight of these creatures filled me with apprehension. There was no life in their eyes.

This sense came from years of experience confronting all sorts of beasts and monsters. I knew precisely what was in front of me.

After all, those lifeless eyes were also bloodred.

My body trembled uncontrollably, and sweat ran down my back. I stifled my breathing, fighting desperately not to make a sound. Slow, deep breaths…

No doubt about it. It's them…!

Why? How? They weren't supposed to be here…!

I held my breath, struggling to hide my growing alarm. At that moment, the wolves raised their heads.

Did they notice me…?!

I readied myself to leap to the ground at a moment's notice—when the wolves bolted off in the other direction, without so much as a glance my way.

After they were gone, I retreated back the way I had come.

Once I had gained enough distance, I pulled a small whistle

from my pocket. I was supposed to blow it in the event of an emergency.

So I did precisely that, a high-pitched sound reverberating throughout the forest.

Al soon appeared. He was running toward me, and the knights were not far behind. “Acryl?! What’s going on?!”

I braced myself, on high alert.

“Al! Watch out for any wolves around here! They’re actually monsters!”

“What? Why?” he asked with suspicion.

Once I was close enough, I whispered in a low voice so only he could hear: “I spotted monsters that should not be here… The kind vampires use.”

“…What? You mean the type you were forced to fight while you were held captive by them?”

“They stank of blood, and they had the same eye color. Be careful. They’ll keep coming back—you can’t kill them. As soon as you think you’ve finished them off, they recover. One false move, and you might die.”

“All right. I’ll make sure everyone knows. I know it’s dangerous, Acryl, but can you scout on ahead? The knights will probably draw too much attention to themselves.”

“I was about to tell you that. We need to find out why they’re here.”

“…Could they have tracked you this far?”

“…I don’t know.”

“All right. Don’t overdo it. We’ll stick together from here on out. Knights, follow us at a distance. If Acryl or I get into a fight, back us up,” Al instructed the escort.

“Sir!” the knights called back in unison.

And so we pushed forward as a group. The thick stench of blood lingered all around, so I had no difficulty following the wolves’ tracks.

After a while, we spotted a commotion up ahead.

The smell of blood thickened, and I could hear the wolves howling in the distance. I glanced at Al, who had likewise turned toward me. After we exchanged nods, I searched the area ahead of us from the cover of the trees.

I soon found a woman breathing heavily, encircled by the wolves. She had already sustained several bites and injuries; she

was bleeding from her arms and legs.

Her hair was dark blond, and her crimson eyes twitched with fear as she stared down the wolves. A surge of suppressed memories rose up in my mind, and I caught my breath.

The stifling stench of blood in large puddles, pieces of flesh lying all around. And among the faces staring coldly down at me was hers…

“Are you all right, Acryl?” Al whispered, grabbing me by the shoulders.

“Ah! Al…”

The wolves were snarling, waiting for another opening to attack, while she attempted to fight them off with her magic.

I must have lost myself for a moment. Shaking off the lingering remnants of those painful memories, I returned my attention to Al.

“I recognize that woman.”

“What? You can’t have…”

“She’s a vampire. But what is she doing here…?”

“…If that’s true, we can’t let her escape. Are you up to this, Acryl?”

“Of course.”

“All right. Let’s go, then. I’ll cover you with my magic, and the knights will have your back. Don’t do anything rash, okay?” he cautioned.

“I don’t need *you* to tell me that!” I leaped into the trees and tried to reach the woman before the wolves could.

“Pull back! Ice Needle!” Al cried, summoning up countless icicles from the forest floor and sending them down on the wolves.

While the beasts were hindered by this surprise attack, I aimed my spear for their necks, separating their heads from their bodies.

Now fully aware of our presence, the surviving wolves turned to us with vacant eyes.

“Wh-what?!” The woman was agape.

“Don’t move! You’ll get us all in trouble!” Al declared, placing a hand on the ground in warning.

The next moment, icy pillars shot up from the earth to create a boundary around her. The wolves attempting to close in on her were forced to drop back, while the woman herself was unable to move. In essence, Al had prevented her from escaping, while still protecting her from further attacks.

“Attack! Destroy them all!” Al shouted.

The knights unleashed their magic, sending fire and wind through the air to knock the rest of the pack off their feet.

Even lying on the forest floor, however, the wolves still bared their teeth at us.

“I knew it! They’re just like those monsters…!”

“Don’t hold back! Tear them all to pieces if you have to! Make sure you finish them off!”

The bloodied wolves continued to fight, even those who had lost limbs. The sight was truly grotesque, and some of the knights faltered briefly. But only briefly—they quickly resumed the attack on Al’s order.

The magical bombardment increased, descending on our foes

until they were completely immobilized.

Al and I rushed in to finish them off, either taking their heads or piercing their hearts.

“Tch! They’re regenerating!”

“That’s the problem with these weird monsters!”

Every time a wolf rose back to its feet, we knocked it down and slew it, nearly gagging on the blood in the air—when at last, they were no more.

Some of the knights looked ready to vomit at the reek from the carnage. It truly was an awful sight.

It wasn’t long ago that I had been trapped in an environment just like this… The mere thought of it sent a shudder through my body.

“Master Algard! Whoa, what the heck?!”

The adventurers must have heard the commotion—and they quickly found the gruesome spectacle.

“Be careful. Some of them might still be breathing. If they are, crush their heads or hearts to make sure they won’t get up again!” Al ordered.

The knights and adventurers moved to inspect the battlefield to take care of any survivors. Meanwhile, Al and I approached the vampire woman trapped in the cage of ice.

She was sitting exhausted on the ground. She slowly took notice of us, turning from me to Al and back again, and surprise appeared on her face.

“You… You look familiar. No, it can’t be. You’re the runaway Lycant…?”

“Be silent,” I growled, pressing my spear against the woman’s neck.

This vampire was one of those responsible for throwing me into that living hell. I wanted nothing more than to tear her to shreds.

The woman, however, was unimpressed by my threat. Didn’t she care about preserving her life? Or did she honestly think I wouldn’t kill her?

“Are you a vampire?” Al asked.

“…You ask, as if you aren’t one yourself? I didn’t know there were other vampires unknown to us…”

“We recognize each other, then. Good… I’m taking you into custody, and you’re going to tell me everything you know. Like what your people are up to.”

The woman cackled at Al's sharp tone.

Then, with a fatigued expression, she looked up at us. Her laughter grew. "Hah! Ha-ha-ha! You do like to take your time! If you want to live, why don't you hurry up and kill me?"

"What…?"

"If you're going to kill me, get on with it! Before *it* gets here!"

"*It…?* What are you talking about?"

"You think I have time to explain?! If you're not going to kill me, I'll just have to do it myself!"

With that, the woman grabbed my spear and tried to thrust it deep into her throat. I frantically wrenched the weapon from her hands while Al held her back.

"Kill me! Kill me! Be quick about it! Before that *fiend* finds me again!"

"Guh! What's wrong with you…?! Calm down!" Al urged as the woman fought to shake him off.

"You won't be able to save yourselves, you hear me? It'll take you all! All of you! It will devour you and keep devouring you! It will kill you again and again! You won't be granted the peace of death!"

With no other way to silence her, Al wrapped an arm around her throat.

Unable to breathe, the woman shook violently for a long moment before losing consciousness.

Al broke into a stern frown as she fell limp. "…What exactly is going on here?" he murmured.

"I know not. What did she mean by *it will kill you again and again*?" I asked.

"No idea… Anyway, let's restrain her and bring her back for interrogation," Al muttered, rubbing his temples. "I guess we should let my sister and the others know that we've captured a vampire from the Kingdom of Cambus. And…" He paused there, glancing back at the remains of the fallen monsters as the knights and adventurers inspected the bodies.

There was so much gore. I doubted that any of us would be getting the smell out of our clothes for a long while.

Al surveyed the trees and forest floor, dyed dark red with

blood.

“We have to let them know about these monsters. If there are others out there, we’re going to be in for a world of trouble…”

The encounter near Filwach still left a bad taste in our mouths as we decided to head back to the capital.

When we arrived, the royal castle was in an uproar.

“Has something happened?” Lainie called out as she hurried along beside us. With her acute senses, she would have easily recognized that everyone was on edge.

“I’m not sure… I wanted to let Euphie know what we found in Filwach immediately…”

We hurried into one of the gardens by the detached palace. As though waiting for us, Ilia stepped out of the building and rushed our way.

“Lady Anisphia! You’re back safe and sound, I see.”

“Did something happen, Ilia? The whole castle seems to be up in arms…”

“I’m so sorry. I know you must all be tired from your journey, but Queen Euphyllia wants to see you at once. She has important news for you.”

“For me? Is it urgent? Okay. I need to talk to her as well, so I’ll be right there. Also, we need to let Tilty get some rest.”

Tilty was still unsteady on her feet, relying on Lainie to support her.

Ilia’s eyes briefly went wide, then narrowed. “Did something happen out there?”

“I’ll explain later. I’ll take Lainie to see Euphie. Everyone else needs to take a breather…”

“Very well. Then you should go at once, both of you. I suspect you’ll be asked to leave the capital again…”

“Leave the capital? With Euphie? Why…? No, I’ll just ask her myself. Take care of everyone, please, Ilia. Lainie! Euphie wants to see us! We’re going to go see her!”

“I—I understand!”

“Good work, Garkie and Navre! I’d like to tell you to take the rest of the day off, but that might not be possible! Make sure you’re ready to leave on a moment’s notice if need be!”

“Understood, Lady Anis.”

“Very well. We’ll be ready.”

After making sure that Garkie and Navre knew the situation, we left Tilty in Ilia’s care and made our way to the castle. As soon as we arrived, a maid showed us into Euphie’s office.

“We’re back, Euphie!” I called out.

“Anis! Lainie! We’ve been waiting for you. Welcome home.”

My father and mother were also in the room, both of them wearing grave expressions. The air was heavy.

“Has something happened? I heard there was urgent news?” I asked, frowning.

“We received a critical missive from Algard on the frontier,” Euphie explained.

“From Algard? About what?”

“He says they captured a runaway vampire attempting to escape into the kingdom’s territory.”

“He caught a vampire?!” I exclaimed in shock, while Lainie muttered the exact same words in perfect unison.

“Acryl is certain of it, so there can be no doubt.”

“Acryl…? If she recognized them, it has to be true.”

“On top of that, they encountered some strange monsters in the course of apprehending the vampire.”

“Hmm…?”

“Algard wrote that he suspects they were turned into vampires themselves, or at least, were being *used* by vampires…” Euphie paused, giving us both a careful look over. “What’s wrong, you two?”

Lainie and I exchanged cautious glances.

What did this coincidence mean?

Euphie watched us suspiciously, head tilted to one side.

“Euphie,” I began. “Actually, we have something we need to report as well.”

“You do?”

“I think we found some of the same monsters Algard mentioned. Which means vampires have already infiltrated the kingdom.”

Euphie gawked in alarm, while my father and mother voiced their apprehension.

“What?!”

“You’re sure of this, Anis?!”

“The vampire we encountered was hostile—not just toward us,

but the Kingdom of Palettia as a whole. She was part of a group banished from the kingdom long ago, and they still resent us for it. I think they've been building up their forces ever since."

"…If this is true, we're in for even more trouble than I thought," Euphie said. "We need to get as much information as possible. Father, Mother—I would like you to deputize for me in political matters while I'm away."

"Must you really go in person, Euphyllia?" my father asked with a worried frown. "These are vampires. Algard should be able to report anything he learns…"

Euphie shook her head. "We need to be sure. And if they attack Algard in greater forces, we risk forfeiting not only this vital chance to learn more, but Algard himself. That would be a great blow, considering we need his help in developing our defenses against vampires."

"That's true, I suppose…," my father murmured.

"Euphyllia," my mother stepped in. "I won't stop you from leaving for the frontier. But please, be sure to take the royal robes with you."

"Mother?!" I practically shouted.

Euphie had a similar reaction to this proposal.

The royal robes were the special dresses that Euphie and I had worn during the unveiling of our flying magical tools.

Since then, they had been kept safe in storage to help with future research and development…

"You may have your Airdra and Airbikes, but it's better to be safe than sorry. If worse should come to worst, you may need to use them to return to the capital," my mother explained.

I contemplated such a scenario.

Yes, they would certainly work as an insurance policy in the event we had any problems with the Airdra or Airbikes.

"But the royal robes are less efficient than the Airdra and Airbikes," I pointed out. "Besides, they were never designed for traveling long distances…"

"I know that. But you are both indispensable to the Kingdom of Palettia. You two are going because you're the only ones qualified for this task, but do keep in mind that you really should be sending your retainers on these missions whenever possible."

"Mother…"

"You're strong, both of you. But you are also uniquely vital to

the kingdom's prospects. You must place greater emphasis on your own lives above others'. Do whatever you can to be prepared. Consider this a mother's wish for her children. Is that clear? Anis? Euphie?"

"…I understand," I answered.

"Yes, you're right, Mother. Nothing is more important than forethought."

We both nodded along, when my mother responded with a loud clap. "Then hurry along and get ready. Take your escort with you, Anis. The same as last time. The situation being what it is, I'm afraid we won't be able to send greater support…"

"We'll do our best to alleviate your anxieties by coming back alive, Mother," Euphie declared.

"…Yes. It's a promise, then." She smiled, but I knew she was worried.

Our lives weren't equal in value to those of others. There were things only we could accomplish.

That's why we had to return alive. Once again, I was left with a heavy feeling in my heart.

We had responsibilities. We had to do everything in our power to secure the future that we had set in motion.

But we couldn't let the weight of that duty defeat us. So long as threats faced this country, we had to confront them.

I won't let those vampires have their way with us. There's so much here we need to protect.

Our meeting concluded, we made our preparations to leave for the frontier with all haste. Euphie and I changed into our royal robes, while Lainie and the others got ready to set out once more.

Our party consisted of me, Euphie, Lainie, and our protective escorts, Garkie and Navre. This time, Euphie and I would ride the Airdra. Lainie and the others would take one Airbike each.

While busying ourselves checking to make sure that there weren't any problems with the Airdra, Tilty appeared, Ilia supporting her with one shoulder.

"Tilty?!" I exclaimed. "What are you doing here?! You should be resting!"

"…I couldn't sleep, what with you all in such a hurry," she answered. She leaned in close, and there was an intense will in her eyes. I could tell I was powerless to stand in her way.

"…Do you understand that you could end up running into

another one of those monsters?" she asked.

"I'm aware of that…"

"Well, you might actually be able to handle it, Anis. Your wild side will come in handy."

"Right, right. We're in a hurry here. Go get some rest."

"Anis," Tilty said, placing a hand on my shoulder and leaning forward.

She was shaking, so I placed a hand on top of hers.

"…Come back. Do you hear me?" Her voice was barely audible.

I patted her on the back. “I will,” I whispered in response. “I still have so much to do, and I’ll need your help.”

“…If you don’t return, you’ll never live it down. Got that?” With that, Tilty slowly pulled away.

Tottering on unsteady feet, she required Ilia’s support to keep from falling down.

Ilia looked worried too, but she quickly flashed us all an encouraging smile. “We’ll be awaiting your return. Please take care.”

“We’ll be off, then.”

Ilia stepped back, still helping Tilty.

Now that our inspections were over, Lainie and the others mounted their Airbikes and activated them.

“Let’s go, Anis.”

“Got it, Euphie.”

Once I was seated safely behind her, the Airdra took off into the sky.

We set out like so many arrows. Looking over my shoulder, I watched as Tilty and Ilia faded into the distance before turning my attention back to the path ahead.

And so we cut through the air, heading straight for Allie and the frontier.

* * *

We arrived at our destination shortly before nightfall, setting down in the garden outside the mansion.

The area looked better maintained than when we last visited. It was filled with knights and adventurers, all of whom were surprised at our arrival.

“Princess Anisphia?! And Queen Euphyllia, too?!” one adventurer cried out.

“Hello, everyone,” I called back to them all. “It’s been a while, hasn’t it? Sorry about this, but could someone get Allie for us?”

“I—I’ll let him know right away!” one of the knights answered, dashing into the mansion.

Lainie and the others all looked tired, but that was little wonder

after all that flying. I would have liked to let everyone get some rest, but we had to learn more about this situation first.

"Master Algard will see you now!" the knight called out as he rushed back. "Please come into the office!"

"Thank you. Euphie?"

"Yes."

The knight led us inside, where we found Allie and Acryl waiting.

"Anis, Euphyllia," Allie said in greeting. "I wasn't expecting you to come in person—especially not so soon."

"I decided that your report called for direct intervention," Euphie answered. "Apologies, Algard, but could we jump straight to the matter at hand?"

"Ah. Then you want to check on the vampire we took captive?"

"How is she taking her confinement?"

"She seemed exhausted. She's asleep now. I wouldn't be surprised if she wakes up soon, though."

"Oh, I shall gladly wake her," Acryl growled grumpily, her hair bristling.

I sensed that her hatred for vampires went over and beyond her dislike for me. But when you considered what she had suffered because of them, that reaction was understandable…

"I'll take you to her, then. We're keeping her underground," Allie explained, leading us to the mansion's basement.

The corridors were dimly lit, and the air was cool. The long shadows on the dark walls made for an eerie atmosphere.

Arriving at her cell, we found the vampire lying alone on a bed.

"That's her…?"

"Yeah… Asleep, she looks like a regular person."

"What a bother…"

Once again, I was reminded just how much danger vampires posed.

Well, if we were going to get any information out of her, we would first have to wake her up. Lucky for us…

"…Ugh…," she groaned, slowly opening her eyes.

"Good timing," Allie remarked under his breath.

Still half asleep, the woman leaped to her feet, hitting her back against the wall as her glowing, crimson eyes shot open.

Hearing the rattling of chains, I gave her a proper once-over. On closer inspection, I could see that her arms and legs were

shackled.

Allie unlocked the door to her cell, approaching her at a brisk pace.

“Huh?!” she exclaimed. “Wh-where am I…?!”

“So you’re awake, vampire? Don’t try to resist.”

“You…!”

Despite her restraints, the vampire tried to rise to her feet, fixing Allie with a hateful glare.

“Do not move,” Acryl warned, grabbing the vampire by the neck. “And do not even *think* about screaming.”

“Ngh…! You—! You’re the Lycant…”

The vampire moaned in agony as Acryl increased the pressure—to the point that I was worried she might snap her neck.

“Let her go, Acryl,” Allie said.

“But—”

“Did you hear me? I said let her go.”

At that stern rebuke, Acryl released the vampire from her grip.

Her neck freed, the vampire let out a weak cough. Then, after catching her breath, she looked up to take in the rest of us.

Her eyes widened in shock. “…Tiris?” she murmured into the silent cell.

That name belonged to Lainie’s mother. The captive was watching Lainie in mute astonishment.

Lainie pursed her lips. “I’m not Tiris,” she said reluctantly. “Tiris was my mother.”

“Her daughter…? Where’s Tiris, then…?!”

“…My mother is dead.”

“…Dead? Tiris…? Hah! Ha-ha-ha!” Stunned by Lainie’s admission, the vampire broke out into uncontrollable laughter. “So she’s dead? The fool. Always so selfish, so free-spirited… It’s not fair.”

“Did you know my mother?” Lainie asked.

“…Yes, I knew her. I never would have thought of her as a mother, though. *Her*, having a child?”

“Can you tell me about her? About yourself? About vampires?” Lainie asked, approaching the woman.

The vampire looked up and let out a deep breath. “…What’s your name?”

“Lainie.”

“Lainie… I see. Very well. I’m willing to talk to Tiris’s daughter.

In exchange, I want you to kill me when you're done. You can have my magicite if you want. It will help you to increase your power, so it's a good exchange."

"…Why do you want to die so badly? What are you afraid of?" Lainie asked quietly.

The vampire woman curled up in an effort to control her trembling, breathing heavily. "Tiris was right. We should have seen it sooner."

"Seen what? What are you talking about?" Lainie probed.

The vampire woman didn't respond immediately. After several long inhalations to regulate her breathing, she continued. "Let me introduce myself first. My name is Ruella. I grew up with Tiris."

"Then you're a childhood friend of hers?"

"She was a real oddball, I'll tell you that. A vampire from birth, yet she turned her back on the clan's appointed mission."

"Your appointed mission…? What is that?" I asked.

"It's twofold. The first part is to uncover the truth of magic. The second is to exact revenge on the Kingdom of Palettia, which exiled our ancestors. Only the elders really obsess over the revenge part, though. I was never interested in any of that."

"…How long have your elder vampires been alive?"

"Two or three hundred years, I guess? There are fewer and fewer of them now."

"What about you, Ruella?"

"Me? Just over a hundred."

I had expected a number like that, but it still came as a shock to hear her say it so casually. Vampires truly were monsters capable of transcending human limits.

"Wait, but if you're over a hundred, then my mother…"

"She would be about the same age. Give or take ten or twenty years."

"That's a pretty big margin of error…"

For a vampire, capable of living for centuries, a couple of decades might not seem like much, but it was still strange to me. Especially with how casually she treated it.

"We young vampires were only interested in uncovering the nature of magic. None of us were interested in revenge. All we wanted was to spend our days in the pursuit of truth."

"But you're saying that other vampires want revenge, yes? That would have put you at odds with them, right?"

“The matriarch decides the will of the clan, not the individual.”

“You’re led by a matriarch? You don’t mean the ruler of the Kingdom of Cambus, do you?”

“The Kingdom of Cambus?” Ruella repeated, her shoulders shaking slightly as she broke out into a fit of laughter. “Yes, you could say that,” she finally answered. “Then again, not really.”

“…What do you mean?”

“The Kingdom of Cambus is just a ruse we vampires conjured up so your people wouldn’t discover us. It isn’t a real country.”

“…That explains why Acryl said she had never heard of it.”

“Demi-humans only care about their own kind. We took advantage of their disparate groups to make it look like *we* had a country.”

“…All so the Kingdom of Palettia would remain unaware of your existence? But how did your vampire clan hold it all together?”

“We made them obey,” Ruella explained. “The matriarch decides all our policies. And to be matriarch, all you need is strength. If a stronger person turns up, they will become the next leader. For us, magic is everything. It’s only natural to follow whoever is strongest in it.”

“How was my mother a traitor…?” Lainie asked.

“A traitor? Did she say that?”

“We encountered another vampire before coming here. She called Lainie’s mother a traitor,” I explained.

“What? You’ve met another vampire?” Allie stared at me in surprise.

“Near Filwach,” I said with a nod.

“Filwach? I suppose it isn’t all that far from the frontier, but if they’ve encroached that far…”

“We can talk about that later,” I interrupted. “Let’s discuss everything in order. Tell us, what made Lainie’s mother a traitor?”

“…Tiris left, against the wishes of the elders. Some called her a traitor for it, but it wasn’t because of anything she did. No, it was more like she gave up on the clan.”

“She gave up on you… Why?”

“Because she was an eccentric. We just wanted to uncover the true nature of magic, and if possible, to exact revenge on the Kingdom of Palettia. Tiris was the only exception. She wasn’t interested in learning the truth.”

Ruella stared off into the distance as she recounted all this, mulling over distant memories.

"She had outstanding talent, and could have probably even become matriarch herself if she wanted. But she wasn't interested in any of that. No, she was more inclined to visit the demi-human tribes and engage with them. That's why the more extreme members of the clan despised her."

"For a group of vampires who place the pursuit of truth above all else, she certainly must have seemed like a strange one," Allie murmured with interest.

Ruella let out a loud snort. "That's probably why she stormed off. Tiris wasn't like other vampires. But what a surprise, hearing that she's passed away, and had a child, too. Her head was in the clouds right up to the very end. I always thought of her as a fool, but now I envy her…," she murmured sadly.

From the way she spoke, it was clear Ruella and Tiris had been close. Still, as sweet as this was, we didn't come here to talk about their personal history.

"You said Tiris interacted with other groups outside of your vampire clan? That means other vampires must have as well, right? So why are you oppressing all these demi-humans, using them as slaves?"

"…There was a change in our approach."

"What do you mean?"

"Right… It all changed once that *fiend* was born."

"Fiend…?"

"It all went south after that *thing* came into the world! It should never have been allowed to become matriarch! We should have killed it when we had the chance…!"

If Ruella's hands had been unbound, she might have clutched her head in despair. She was quivering all over, and sweat was beading on her forehead.

I couldn't even be sure if she was still listening to us. What could possibly send her into such a panic?

"What is this fiend, Ruella? Are you saying this new matriarch is directing your people's actions?"

"That's right… She was a monster from the moment she came into the world, always aiming for the very top. And she was so talented! Everyone was blinded by her skill and ability! They set her up on a pedestal, without ever realizing just how insane she is!"

“Calm down, Ruella,” I urged.

“How am I supposed to calm down when that, that *thing*—! It doesn’t matter! You’re all going to die! It will devour you all, and keep killing you over and over and over and over again!”

“Ruella!”

“I’m telling you, it’s after me! It’ll chase me to the ends of the earth if it has to! My only escape is death!” she cried out at the top of her lungs, breathing heavily. “Please, I’m begging you! Kill me now, while you still can…!”

Thrown into a frenzy, Ruella hung her head and began to sob.

I doubted we would learn any more from her for the time being. At the very least, we had discovered that the reason for her abject terror was this new matriarch.

My thoughts took me back to the vampire we had encountered near Filwach who’d taken so many lives, using and abusing them as her servants. At the end, it sounded like she called out a name…

“Lilana…”

No sooner did I utter the word under my breath than Ruella’s head shot up.

“How do you know that name?!”

“So I was right. That’s the name of your new leader, this fiend you keep talking about, isn’t it?”

The way the vampire had cried out, I assumed she must have been calling for someone. It looked like I had hit the nail on the head.

Ruella shuddered even more violently, and I could hear her teeth clattering. The only possible explanation was that she must have witnessed sights even more atrocious than what we had encountered in Filwach.

When you thought about it that way, her reaction was understandable. Especially when you considered what their leader wanted to accomplish.

“Euphie, everyone. Listen to me. I’ve been thinking about the vampires’ goals, and based on what we’ve heard so far—”

Just as I was about to voice my conclusions, a voice sounded from outside the room.

“M-Master Algard! T-trouble!”

"…What is it?"

It was a knight, rushing down the stairs into the basement. His expression was panicked, his breath ragged.

"M-monsters! We don't know what they are! And they have us surrounded!"

* * *

Let's turn now to a certain mysterious creature—a story of a dream-obsessed monster and its pursuit of a magic called eternity…

* * *

What I sought was the miracle of magic.

Such was my life's mission—a dream I needed to fulfill at all costs.

Yes, I hunted the power to forge miracles—*magic*.

From my earliest memories, I already knew what I most desired.

Knowledge passed down through the generations guided me along my path.

Everyone had high expectations for me. They all desired it of me. They blessed my journey.

To acquire eternity, the ultimate truth, and the end of the earth itself.

Forever believing that this temporary eternity could become truly immortal.

We lived our lives chasing after it. Because we were born to an eternity worth keeping.

And so I had to live my life righteously.

The wishes within me weren't my own—they were the dreams and tenets of my predecessors and brethren.

I couldn't bear to lose anyone. Not a soul. Because magic was a precious gift, capable of bringing happiness and joy.

I chased a world where nothing was lost, a world of eternity and perfection. And it was magic that would make such a place

possible.

So I had to save them, all those imperfect souls whose lives lacked eternity.

To be eternal, one must possess beauty. And so I sought it out.

To be eternal, one must possess strength. And so I sought it out.

To be eternal, one must possess wisdom. And so I sought it out.

I convinced myself that people would rejoice at their salvation.

But it wasn't enough. I needed more, more, *more*. No matter how much I had, I wasn't fulfilled.

I couldn't allow myself to be ugly, because everyone would hate me. I would keep only the beautiful parts.

Leaving only what I needed, and divvying up the rest—converting ugliness into something else.

It would be a waste just to throw it all away. So, my dear, won't you love these little ones for me?

One day, we will succeed in our great quest, and the world will be filled with happiness. When that happens, we'll be one again.

Until then, don't grow old. Don't leave anyone behind. There can be no disappearing, no missing out.

Yes, forever. We'll be together for all of time, all right?

And you'll make me even more beautiful, even stronger, even wiser, okay?

I'll remember everything. So wait, just a little while longer.

I'll save the world, I promise—for you.

I'll conquer the sky, singing with each and every step along the way. Reaching out my hand, the moon itself will want to become mine.

Ah, what a beautiful moon today! We're going to have a wonderful night!

After receiving the grave news, we hurried back upstairs into the garden. The night closed in around us as we stepped out of the mansion. I could hear growls emanating from the dark forest.

The eyes of the monsters surrounding the building glowed with an eerie crimson light, piercing the shadows. There were so many of them that anyone else might have mistaken the sight for a stampede.

"Th-they just showed up without warning…!" the knight explained in a shaky voice.

"…I've never seen so many in one place. This is no joke!" Allie muttered, glaring back at the creatures with a sour expression.

The monsters had essentially placed the mansion under siege. At least for the time being, they weren't approaching any farther.

"They're holding their positions… Someone *has* to be controlling them. Especially with those red eyes they have…"

"Yep, there's no doubt about it. There's a vampire behind this."

"They must have followed Ruella…"

A wave of trepidation fell over us all.

At that moment, a voice sounded from overhead. Glancing up with a jolt, I spotted a fair-skinned girl floating just above the moon.

Her silver-white hair reached all the way down to her legs, glistening as if it had absorbed the bright moonlight. Her skin was so pale it might never have been exposed to the sun, and it was only accentuated by her jet-black dress.

And her eyes—they shone with a mysterious, sinister crimson glow. That sight alone was enough to fill me with a deep sense of unease.

"Wh-what the…?! Is that a…human…? Or a monster…?!" I heard someone whisper in fear.

I couldn't blame them for that response.

After all, two pairs of huge wings stretched from her back—one shaped like a bat's, the other like a bird's. It was a discordant sight, beauty and ugliness merged as one—and I couldn't take my eyes off

her.

"Forgive me for dropping in like this," she said with a faint, enigmatic smile. "I'm looking for my quarry. She's very important to me."

Still wearing that innocent smile of hers, the strange girl offered us a deep bow. Her refined, elegant movements were so captivating that I heard some of the knights let out gasps of wonder.

But the second she narrowed those bewitching eyes of hers, a pain like nothing I'd ever felt shot up my spine. My Impressed Seal was screaming out a warning.

"Sh-she's trying to bewitch us! Focus, everyone! Don't let her rob you of your senses!" I cried out with a grimace.

Euphie and the others immediately braced themselves for the worst.

Behind us, I could hear the knights and adventurers readying for a fight.

"Oh…? You there, you seem to know a lot about vampires. How so?" Her head tilted to one side, the strange girl pointed toward us. "And you, the blond boy and the black-haired girl. Brethren unknown to us! You seem so similar—are you brother and sister? And you, you're the Lycant girl! But how odd. What would bring vampires and Lycants to this small country?"

The girl continued to stare down at us, head askance as though she honestly found our presence curious.

Her mannerisms, her gestures, the way she stole our attention—my Impressed Seal continued to shoot bursts of biting pain through my spine with each and every movement.

This was over and beyond Lainie's powers of attraction. This girl was like a little devil, her alluring mannerisms almost sickly-sweet. Despite her inhuman appearance, she was charming—and that in and of itself was horrifying. We could be possessed any moment if we didn't steel ourselves.

"Oh, you don't need to make such scary faces," the girl said. "I haven't done anything—yet. I'm just searching for someone. We can be friends, good strangers."

"…How can you say that while trying to ensnare our minds?" I demanded.

"…? Don't you want to have a relaxed chat? Have I done something to alarm you?"

There was something wrong here, a potentially fatal

discrepancy. The fear and apprehension I felt looking at her was fundamentally different from anything I had experienced before, enough to send me breaking out into a cold sweat.

"Who are you…?" Euphie asked, desperately fighting to keep her voice under control.

"Me? Oh, dear me! We haven't introduced ourselves yet! Greetings! My name is Lilana. I hope we can all work together."

Lilana. That name made me even more cautious. This girl was the vampire leader, their matriarch—the one Ruella feared above all else, the one she had called a *fiend*.

"Lilana…," I repeated. "That would make you the vampire matriarch, right?"

"Oh? You've heard of me? That must mean my quarry *is* here after all. Yes? You're harboring the vampire Ruella, aren't you?"

"What would you do if I told you I've never heard of her?"

"Hmph. You're lying. Which means she *is* here!" Lilana said with an innocent laugh.

She must have been able to see that we were prepared for the worst, but she didn't seem to mind.

I inhaled sharply. Was that a sign of confidence on her part? Or could she really be that naive? Either way, her manner of speaking was uncanny.

"You know, I don't mean to antagonize you any more than necessary," she purred. "That's the truth."

"…You have a funny way of showing it, placing your monsters around us," I shot back.

"Oh! I only wanted to keep any futile resistance to a minimum, you understand?" She spoke as if this was self-evident.

If she really meant it that way, then she really was out of her mind. I knew trouble when I saw it.

"…You seem awfully sure of yourself," I pointed out.

"But it's the truth. One cannot go against the flow of time."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It's a fact that the Kingdom of Palettia will be destroyed. Oh, but don't worry. I won't take your lives. No, I'm offering you the greatest proposal of all!" Lilana beamed innocently.

"Coming out with an *offer* while threatening to destroy us?" Euphie asked with venom in her voice. "What on earth are you proposing?"

Lilana smiled back benevolently.

“Oh, you know. Spending eternity with *us*. That’s what.”

“Eternity…?”

“Yes! An eternity without suffering, without sadness, where everyone can be happy and filled with joy. I’m preparing a new world for you all!”

“That’s a lofty goal… You honestly think you can deliver on it?” I asked.

“Of course. That’s what our quest for the origin of magic is all about.”

“So you’re saying you’re going to turn everyone into vampires?”

“No, actually. I’m offering you a grander, even more sublime form of eternity! To be *one*, forever! I will take the entire world unto myself and create eternal peace! No discrimination, no strife, no disease! A world where everyone is united in eternal joy!”

No doubt everyone had wished for something like that at least once in their lives.

Eternal peace. A world free from discrimination, from conflict, and from illness, in which everyone and everything was accepted unconditionally.

It certainly would be wonderful if such a world could be realized.

Yet I had seen for myself how a vampire drunk on such ideals could be transformed. Even now, I didn’t want to remember.

Nor could I possibly forget the voice of the demi-human weeping in despair at the loss of his people, all taken by her. So I couldn’t possibly accept Lilana’s honeyed words.

But Lilana did not seem interested in our reactions.

“People are vulnerable,” she continued. “They grow old. They weaken. They *decline*. They learn to fear their limited time on this earth, their lives little more than flickering flames. That’s just what they are. But that’s why I’m pursuing a greater goal—so that they can find value in life. So that they can look forward to the future. People are wonderful creatures! I love them all so much! I want to give them eternal unity! Then, they won’t lose anything! They won’t harm one another. There will be nothing but bliss!”

“Be silent!” Acryl cried, interrupting Lilana’s ecstatic delirium.

She stared up at her in disgust, ready to tear into her.

“You believe that is happiness? You cannot tell me you’ve forgotten what you sacrificed in exchange! You kidnapped so many people and used them to kill those horrible things! You expect us to believe you after everything you’ve done?!” Acryl shouted, her voice turning hoarse.

Lilana tilted her head to one side, watching Acryl with a curious expression.

“Why curse me for your own weakness?”

She didn’t seem intentionally malicious—just completely guileless.

…*Ah, I knew it would come to this.* There was no way we were going to find common ground here.

“I’m sorry. I knew your kind were weak, but I still failed to fight you all properly,” Lilana said to Acryl. “Eternity might still be far off, but it’s no longer unreachable. Soon, I will have saved you all. It’s because of your weakness that you suffer, you know? But I can save you from it.”

“Do not take me for a fool! You claim you want to *save* us, but you’ve already killed so many of my people!”

“You misunderstand.”

“…Oh, do I?”

“Those monsters you consider *abominations* are all born from me; therefore, none of them will die. They are all one, with me.”

“…Nonsense.”

“I can restore each of the souls that I have taken in, along with the memories contained in them. I’m rather skilled at *rebirth*, you know? No matter who you kill, they’ll just come back to me!”

Lilana’s comments just didn’t add up. Nothing she said made any sense.

She treated life itself like a broken toy for her to fix. And once in her clutches, she was happy to play with them and regenerate them whenever she felt like it.

Her view of life was simply too much at odds with our own. That explained her fearlessness and her strange childlike innocence.

“Don’t despair,” she continued. “I wanted you to become stronger. I would have made you my friend, and you would have made my eternity even more precious. Don’t you think?”

“You… How can you…?” Acryl shook her head from side to side. She couldn’t even pretend to understand. Fear and disgust washed over her as she stepped backward.

“…Lilana, wasn’t it?” Allie began, advancing to protect Acryl. “Your words are of no comfort to us.”

“Oh? Why not?”

“You don’t understand the human heart. Your *salvation* is entirely subjective. It’s absurd to think you can save people like that. If you want to play with dolls, do so alone. You are a fiend. You’re not capable of saving anyone.”

“What is this…? No one has ever criticized me like that before. And from a fellow vampire!” Allie’s repudiation must have come as no small shock to Lilana, but she responded with a casual nod. “Maybe if we become friends, we’ll understand each other better!”

“…Friends? Is that what you call the people you’ve absorbed?” I asked.

“Naturally. Why wouldn’t I?” Lilana responded as if it was blindingly obvious. “The whole world suffers when a precious life is lost, so I have to protect them. I’ll show you a dream without loss. I’ll show you a world without end. So, tell me you’ll join me. I just want to make everyone happy.”

“Enough!” I shouted. “Talking to you won’t solve anything!”

I could feel my Impressed Seal awakening in response to my indignation. This creature couldn’t be allowed to live. She was a threat—one that needed to be eliminated here and now, if that was possible.

My anger, my disgust, and my dread all came together, combining with my dragon aura as it flared around me.

Perhaps sensing this, Lilana betrayed a hint of surprise for the first time.

“…Oh! Oh my! Well, well, well. What do we have here?!”

With a look of utter astonishment, she slowly descended to the ground—then, keeping her eyes locked onto me, her lips twisted in an ecstatic grin.

“How did I fail to notice it…? Oh, I slipped up there! I beg your pardon, good lady! Ah, to meet such a wonderful person! Yes, won’t you tell me your name?”

“Huh…? Why are you acting so different all of a sudden…?” I asked with suspicion.

Lilana let out a wistful sigh, her eyes glistening. I knew that

look. I had seen it before. No…

"Is this…love?!" she asked, sounding completely besotted.

"Excuse me?" Euphie growled, her voice low and threatening.

She was giving off such a foreboding air that the others each took a step away from her.

“I’ve never seen such a beautiful soul! Yes, yes! This *must* be love! This is fate!”

I didn’t know what to make of Lilana’s sudden show of infatuation.

Before I could respond, Euphie pulled out the Arc-en-Ciel, glowering at the vampire with an expression I had never seen before. “Vampire matriarch Lilana, this is the Kingdom of Palettia. *Our* territory. Your actions here are unforgivable… And how dare you speak to Anis that way? If you value your life, you’ll hold your tongue.”

“Oh…? So the lady is called Anis? Thank you kindly! You do realize your little country is going to be swallowed up, yes? How I behave is my business, is it not?”

“…If you don’t care to listen, how about I destroy you?”

The force of Euphie’s magical energy, of her raw anger, was unprecedented. *Whoa…! She’s like a completely different person…!*

Watching this outburst, Lilana was visibly hit with another shock.

“…Oh? Don’t tell me you’re a spirit covenantor? Would that make you this kingdom’s ruler?”

“What of it?”

“Oh, how rude of me! May I ask your name?”

“Euphyllia Fez Palettia.”

“Euphyllia… Yes, I’ll remember that one. Allow me to introduce myself properly. My name, as you said, is Lilana. My ancestors were on a quest for eternity, and I’ve inherited that long-cherished wish. With that said, allow me to prove to you, the nation that banished our ancestors for dreaming too high, that your *outmoded* magic is no longer required!” Lilana’s attitude underwent a sudden reversal, her next words quiet but forceful. “I will bring an end to the era of magic and usher in a paradise in which all can truly *live*! An eternal world, devoid of suffering! And I’ll start by taking you, your dusty old magic, and your whole country!”

“I won’t let you!” I cried out, stepping forward beside Euphie as I glared at Lilana.

At this, the vampire leader turned her heated gaze my way. “Why? Why would a wonderful woman like you take the side of a spirit covenantor? I thought monsters were anathema to the people

of the Kingdom of Palettia?"

"Because as a royal princess, I'll always defend this country."

"…*You're* a princess…? How baffling! Just how much has the Kingdom of Palettia changed over the years?"

"We're changing now! So what makes you think I'll let someone like you destroy our homeland?!"

"Why not? You can have eternal happiness if you just take my hand."

"If your ideals really were as good as you think they are, everyone would accept them. But they don't! Because you have a warped vision of happiness! If you really wanted to offer them salvation, you would try to understand them! But your happiness, your ideals—they're all born from your own inflated ego!"

"…My ego? Why take issue with that?" Lilana asked, tilting her head to one side in genuine wonder. "There are so many creatures in this world who lack the power to save themselves. Someone has to step in and manage them, don't you think? They're already unhappy on their own."

"We're not livestock for you to manage! What you're really talking about is domination!"

"What's wrong with that?"

"If you have to ask, then we'll never understand each other!" I cried out in exasperation.

Lilana shook her head in disbelief. "…I *don't* understand. Why would you, being so beautiful, choose to live that way? Why? But you're so magnificent! I thought *you*, at least, would see the truth! Why don't you?!" Her voice gave way to a hollow cry, as though she had just witnessed a heartbreaking tragedy.

Why did she seem so obsessed with me? What did she see in me?

"…I don't understand. I can't. I have to find out. Yes, the world must become eternal so I can unravel its secrets! I *have* to bring everyone joy! Make it so nothing is ever lost!" Lilana muttered, her anguished countenance giving way to a grin.

Then, with outstretched arms, she turned her passionate gaze to me once more. "Anis! I'm in love! Yes, I knew it the moment I first saw you! I *want* you! I want to *understand* you! Become eternal with me!"

"You're insane!" I shouted back. "I refuse!"

"If we can't understand each other now, then let's merge

together until we do! My dear, sweet Anis!"

There was something different about Lilana's smile now. It was predatory, like a creature about to torment its prey.

Her gaze burned with obsession, sending a shiver running down my spine. I couldn't stand her looking at me like that! She was going to drive me mad!

"It's so sad, not seeing eye to eye! My heart bleeds! But this pain is only temporary! Once I devour you, it will all go away…!"

The monsters surrounding us let out deafening howls—which meant that the battle had already begun.

"They're coming! Euphie, Allie! I'll take care of Lilana! You direct the others!"

"Got it!" Euphie answered.

"That goes without saying!" Allie added.

I stepped forward—my royal robe accelerating my movements and bringing me right up to the vampire matriarch in a split second.

I knew how dangerous her kind could be, so I would give it my all from the very start!

"Aerial System: Dragon Heart!"

With that cry, I shrouded the Celestial in compressed dragon magic, forging a crystalline blade.

Lilana, preparing to counter my sudden attack, was left momentarily blinded.

I seized that opening and struck her neck—but failed to cut through.

Her neck wasn't just hard, it was strangely dense, as if it comprised countless layers of sturdy flesh.

That mass of flesh compressed into human form readily absorbed the impact, then tangled itself around my blade.

When I yanked hard at the weapon to pull it out, blood went flying from the gaping wound.

"…Oh, how beautiful," Lilana exclaimed, resting a hand on the injury as the overflowing fountain of blood subsided.

Enraptured, she continued to stare at me while the wound regenerated.

…Seriously? My goal had been to separate her head from her shoulders, and she had simply withstood the attack?

"Ah, I can't wait to take you in!"

With that emotional outburst, a terrifying number of snake heads extended from her back, each of them quickly lunging

straight for me.

I leaped backward to establish some distance while I mowed them down. This time, there was no resistance as I effortlessly sent their heads flying.

Her body is weirdly compressed, but that's not the case for those appendages she summons. Basically, I have to keep chipping away at her until she can't regenerate anymore…

I had been hoping to destroy Lilana's magicite core, as I had done to the chimera we had fought in Filwach, but that no longer appeared to be an option. My best bet now would be to whittle her down and make her submit.

Fortunately, I had greater mobility than usual thanks to my royal robe. I wasn't about to let this opponent get her hands on me. I just had to keep focusing on one attack after the next!

"Haaah!"

Lilana made no move to dodge my strikes, to the point that I found myself wondering whether she felt any pain at all. Even when I dealt her a blow, she regenerated as if nothing had happened. That was cheating!

"Ah, how wonderful!" she exclaimed. "I never imagined there could be such joy!"

"What?! *What's* wonderful?!" I shot back.

"Everyone is praising me! They've all accepted me! They're saying I was right, that I was their only hope! I always believed in them! But something was always missing!"

She broke into an ecstatic grin as the flesh around her arm inflated, her misshapen limb looming over me.

"It's not enough! It's still not enough! Our eternity isn't yet complete! But everyone is counting on me. We have to get there; we have to unravel the secrets of magic! With eternity, I'll be able to share its wonders with everyone! In a world of perpetual joy!"

I threw the Celestial with all my weight into Lilana's emerging claws. This time, they didn't cut so easily, forcing me to adjust my angle and sever the hand at the wrist.

Once more, she easily regenerated the severed appendage, using her newly restored arm to hug herself.

"I love the way you deny me! Every time you fight back, you define my very existence! Look at me! *See* me! You give me meaning!"

"Are you insane?! Stay back, you creature!" I cried, punching

her with all my strength before she could wrap her arms around me in an embrace.

I could feel the shock of that punch down my whole arm—but it *did* succeed in throwing her backward.

"Anis! I'll cover you!" Euphie shouted.

She and the others were helping Allie and the knights keep the monsters at bay, using every available opening to unleash fresh magic attacks.

Among the group of knights fighting at the front of the group, I spotted Garkie, Navre, and Acryl.

With their regenerative powers, the monsters were incredibly difficult to keep down, forcing the defenders to aim either for their magicite-laced hearts or to crush their skulls.

In the midst of all this, Euphie raised her Arc-en-Ciel into the air.

"Heed my voice! Awaken from your slumber, brothers and sisters mine!" She pressed a hand up against the blade as if in prayer—and the air around her trembled as she spoke. "Gather, my friends! Answer me, and I will give you form. Bring my will to bear."

A bright burst exploded out, the precursor to a magical ability, drawing an arc as it rotated through the air, building momentum and morphing into a ball of pure light.

"Spirit Substantiation."

Euphie swung the Arc-en-Ciel, sending the mass of light swirling like a whirlpool as a crack ran down its center. With a brilliant flash, a figure appeared—a spirit made of fire and light.

The spirit, in the graceful form of a female knight, held in its hands twin swords, one each of light and fire. At Euphie's command, it made for the surrounding demons.

This was a new technique of Euphie's, adapted from the spirit substantiation show that she had performed at my birthday celebration.

In essence, spirit substantiation was a form of magic that was capable of acting autonomously—and indeed, the spirit knight proceeded to destroy one monster after the next. It was nothing short of overwhelming.

“Regenerate as many times as you like, we can keep going until you’re reduced to ashes,” Euphie intoned. “Go.”

With deafening screams, the monsters continued to fall. Finally, once they were all vanquished, the spirit knight turned to Lilana.

“What power…! Is this ancient spirit covenantor magic?!”

With a light flurry of steps, Lilana dodged the knight’s two weapons.

Having waited for this moment, I readied to lash out at her with my own sword, aiming for the neck—only to be stopped by Euphie’s upraised hand.

“Anis! Let’s do this together!”

With this, the spirit knight readied her swords in perfect timing with my Celestial.

The combined attack severed both of Lilana’s arms—though they regenerated immediately.

Meanwhile, the detached limbs bloated as they hit the ground, preparing to birth fresh monsters.

“I don’t think so,” Euphie declared. “Explosion!”

The spirit knight thrust her swords into the detached arms, destroying them from the inside out with a burst of burning light.

In an instant, the severed limbs were obliterated, without leaving so much as a trace.

“Not yet!” Lilana cried, backpedaling. “This isn’t the end! So *this* is spirit covenantor magic?!”

This time, she ripped off her own arm, casting it aside to birth more monsters.

At this rate, there would be no end to this confrontation! We had to immobilize the vampire matriarch herself!

“I see… So you want me to burn it all to the ground?” Euphie muttered dispassionately.

With a swing of her sword, the spirit knight melted away, morphing into something new.

The next moment, a cloud of butterflies enrobed in red light swarmed around Lilana.

“What are you doing…?! Ah! Gah! Geh!”

She clutched at her throat, coughing violently. Meanwhile, the butterflies continued to flutter around her, bringing her to her knees. Looking closely, I noticed a fine powder of glowing light emanating from the apparitions’ wings.

That light soon began to shimmer, as if blinking. By now, the

butterflies had brought not only Lilana down, but her subservient monsters, too.

The magic used to create those things was an Explosion technique. If those butterflies were triggering tiny explosions all around us, then…!

"Disaster Explosion."

One, two, three—those small sparks began to combine into one huge conflagration, the flames spreading in a chain reaction that surrounded Lilana before fully igniting.

"—!"

Lilana's screams turned hoarse as the fiery vortex seared her throat. The next moment, a powerful blast of light detonated, leaving flames that illuminated the darkness.

The monsters similarly caught fire, collapsing one after the other.

Euphie stared out emotionlessly as the light and shadows danced on her face. There was something chillingly beautiful about it.

In fact, she had taken everyone's breath away with that last display of terrifying magic. Even our friends and allies were completely awestruck.

"That was a technique that scorches everything it touches, both inside and out. Not even a vampire could hope to—"

"Oh? Is that what you believe?"

All at once, the flames subsided, and the world returned to darkness and moonlight.

Lilana, just a moment ago standing in the middle of that blazing conflagration, stood there now without a scratch.

"…Impossible…," Euphie murmured, incredulous.

I had exactly the same response. I wouldn't have expected anyone to be capable of regenerating after such a powerful attack. Yet Lilana was alive and well. I couldn't believe my eyes.

"If I was one of your countrymen, your ancient magic would have settled this," Lilana said with a soft grin. "It's terrifyingly beautiful. No wonder our ancestors strove to surpass you."

“How in the world…? How did you survive being incinerated from the inside out…?!”

“Yes, it was a brilliant move! If you were facing anyone else, you would have won, but a mere spirit covenantor cannot defeat me!”

“…I can’t let you live. I’m still going to destroy you!” Euphie cried, her female spirit knight manifesting again, looking even stronger this time around.

With a wave of her Arc-en-Ciel, Euphie sent the knight charging straight for Lilana—who, without betraying a hint of impatience, raised a hand casually into the air.

The next moment, a serpent’s head emerged from her palm like a bud bursting into flower.

The snake opened its jaw wide, bit down, and entwined itself around the spirit knight.

“You caught it…?!” Euphie exclaimed. “How…?!”

“I already knew what you were trying to do,” Lilana answered with a sinister smile. “I won’t let you use the same trick twice.”

The next moment, the spirit knight bent over, trembling—and her body began to disintegrate.

“…Huh?”

I could hardly believe my eyes. Euphie, standing there in mute shock, seemed even more taken aback.

Before long, the disintegrating spirit knight had been reduced enough for the snake to devour it whole, extinguishing it once and for all.

With the spirit dealt with, Lilana let out a satisfied breath. “… Hmm. Yes, what wonderful magic! Even I had a hard time absorbing it!”

“You absorbed it…?! No, that means you drew raw magical energy out from it…?!” Euphie gawked.

“Bingo! ♪” Lilana said with a broad grin.

If she could absorb magical energy directly from a magic-based attack, that would make her a natural enemy against all magic users…!

“We vampires aren’t about to be outdone by mages from the Kingdom of Palettia, nor by spirit covenantors. Though I’m still the only one who’s reached this level, you know?”

So that was why she had been made the vampire matriarch, because of her overwhelming powers when going up against magic

users!

Euphie wasn't the only one taken aback. Everyone here was equally stunned.

After all, magic was supposed to be the greatest of weapons, but it could do nothing here.

"Well, playtime is over. Can I devour you all now?"

Lilana held out her hand, the serpent that had just absorbed the spirit knight extending toward us.

Euphie, still reeling from shock, was slow to evade, leaving me no choice but to throw myself in front of her and bring my sword down on the approaching snake.

"Snap out of it, Euphie!" I called out.

"Euphyllia, focus on destroying the monsters!" Allie shouted from behind. "Everyone, use your magic sparingly! Fight with your weapons unless absolutely necessary! Acryl and I will handle this!"

"Anis…! Algard…! I—I'm sorry…!" Euphie stammered as Allie and Acryl moved to take her place.

The two attacked with their spears, skewering the serpent and sending it crashing to the ground.

"Anis!" Allie shouted. "You concentrate on Lilana! You're the only one who can stand against this foe!"

"I can see that!" I called back.

"Oh?" Lilana exclaimed. "Are you coming, Anis? Then let's dance!"

From here on out, the battle descended into an outright quagmire.

No matter how many times we killed the monsters, they just kept on coming. Even when we succeeded in reducing their numbers, Lilana would immediately replenish them. Meanwhile, I had to devote all my resources into keeping her in check. Yet as the minutes wore on, we were slowly losing ground.

"Are you ready to give up?" Lilana asked, pitying me.

Ignoring her question, I sliced off her arm yet again—only for it to inflate in the air into another monster.

"Why won't you give up?" she continued.

This time, I thrust my blade from in front, effortlessly carving through her stomach—but that swiftly regenerated, too.

“Why do you keep going?”

The battle remained deadlocked, but it was definitely leaning to her advantage. Fatigue was already starting to fall across everyone’s faces.

“Cover each other!” Allie called out. “Everyone who’s starting to tire, fall back! The rest of us will hold the line! Acryl!”

“On it!”

“Navre! Gark! Don’t let anyone interrupt Euphyllia!”

“Understood!”

“We won’t let anything near her! Augh!”

“Lady Euphyllia! Let me support you!” Lainie shouted.

“Thank you…!” Euphie answered.

Allie and Acryl worked together to thin out the encroaching monsters. Those that managed to get through were stopped by Euphie and Lainie, while Navre and Garkie finished them off.

But even after all that, their numbers weren’t getting any smaller.

“Hurry up and surrender!” Lilana bellowed, forcing me to kick back with all my might as she tried to wrap her arms around me.

The impact sent her flying over the bodies of countless dead monsters.

Slipping on their dead carcasses and covered in blood, Lilana slowly pulled herself up.

“Why are you so set on resisting?”

“Because if I let you have me, I’ll be finished!”

“No, you won’t. I’m going to make you eternal!”

“You’re just trying to force people to bend to your will!”

Even though I unleashed slash after slash, I couldn’t cut through her impenetrable layer of condensed flesh, each wound regenerating as though moving backward in time.

I had seen her heal herself more times than I could count, but that still didn’t stop me from gawking.

“I’m getting bored of this,” Lilana muttered, her gleeful expression fading. “Nothing you do will change anything, you know? You’re just wasting everyone’s time. Can’t we end this?”

With that, she opened her hands—and the carcasses of the fallen monsters around her began to move.

Even those whose heads had been crushed gathered around her, merging *into* her. It was horrendous to watch, enough to make my head spin.

I heard the sound of flesh being crushed, of meat being shredded, of flesh being mixed.

Bones shattering, breaking, connecting, and shattering all over again, impossibly quickly and without end.

Before I knew it, Lilana had devoured each and every one of the scattered monster bodies.

It was like when she had spread the monsters out around us, only now in reverse—she was taking the dead bodies in, compressing them and combining them with her own existence.

"You're a monster yourself!"

"Damn you!"

Allie and Acryl tried to attack her, but they couldn't even scratch her.

The next moment, both were thrown back by a powerful burst.

"Guh?!"

"Gyah?!"

"Allie! Acryl!" I called out as the two were knocked to the ground.

By then, Lilana had vanished.

"What?! She's fast…!"

Her next target was Garkie.

"Garkie!"

"Ugh! Gark! What?!"

He'd managed to shield himself with his sword, but he was thrown backward as the vampire matriarch appeared beside him, and he'd tumbled next to Navre.

"Let me teach you about despair. If I kill these people one by one, maybe then you'll understand the pain of loss—and the splendor of eternal life!"

"Stop!"

My vision turned red with rage as I lashed out with the Celestial.

Lilana, however, caught the blade with one hand, her fingers wrapping around it as I pushed her back. She showed no sign of letting go.

"She's the one you care about most, isn't she, Anis?"

A shiver ran down my spine. Lilana wasn't looking at me—she was staring at Euphie.

Holding her free hand out, she unleashed another serpent straight for her.

“Move, Lady Euphyllia!”

“Lainie!”

Lainie rushed forward with her Mana Blade in an effort to halt the oncoming serpent—but the snake twisted its whip-like body and flung her away.

Euphie spun around to protect her, but the serpent struck at them both, jaws wide.

“Nooo!” I screamed at the top of my lungs.

The next moment, magical energy coursed through the Celestial, still clutched in Lilana’s hand, and exploded at close range.

The detonation threw me to the side, but it did succeed in severing the serpent from the vampire’s hand.

I blacked out for a moment as I hit the ground. I couldn’t tell left from right, up from down. Was I still standing, or had I been thrown into the air?

When my vision returned to normal, the first thing I saw was Lilana—still beaming at me, though both of her arms had been blown away.

Time seemed to move in slow motion as she fixed me with an ecstatic grin.

“People grow stronger when they have someone they want to protect. But then they fail to protect themselves. It’s so painful to watch. That’s why I’m giving you this gift—an eternity without loss!”

The next moment, she bit down on my neck, her fangs piercing my flesh.

The pain was so intense that I feared I might lose consciousness. It was like molten lava had been poured directly into my veins, leaving me unable to do anything but scream.

“A-a-aaauuuggghhh?!”

I grabbed Lilana’s head, trying to pull her away with all my strength—but she wouldn’t budge.

The pain was making my vision blurry, and my strength was already leaving me. It was like some burning heat was turning my body inside out.

“Anis!!” Euphie screamed in dismay, leaping toward me.

She quickly intervened by thrusting the Arc-en-Ciel into Lilana’s neck, yanking her away the second her grip relaxed.

I proceeded to deliver a powerful kick into Lilana’s stomach as I

scurried back, falling to my knees. Euphie rushed to help me back up.

"Anis?" she called out desperately. "Hang in there!"

"E-Euphie…"

"Anis…? No… Your eyes are turning red… No, it can't be…?! No, Anis! Stay awake!"

My eyes…? Euphie… What are you talking about…?

I couldn't seem to focus anymore. I needed to stay alert, but my head felt so heavy.

"Now you'll understand me, don't you think so, Anis?"

I could hear someone's voice. As my consciousness slipped into darkness, I couldn't recognize whose it was anymore.

CHAPTER 8
A Contented Princess

I felt like I had just woken from a long dream.

When I opened my eyes, I was staring up at the canopy over my bed. When did I fall asleep? I couldn't remember what I was doing before I dozed off. My senses were still a mess when I heard a knock at the door.

"Good morning, Your Highness," came a voice that I couldn't place.

No sooner did I answer than a maid stepped in, greeting me with a warm smile. "It's a wonderful day today, Your Highness!"

"H-hmm…? Morning… Um, where am I…?"

"…? What are you saying, Your Highness? These are your quarters in the royal castle."

"The royal castle…? But what about the detached palace…?"

"Well, that place might be good for a quick nap every now and then, but if you don't come back to the royal palace, Queen Sylphine will give you a right scolding," the maid said with a giggle, getting me out of bed.

I fell deep into thought as she helped me get ready for the day. *Was* this the royal castle? I mean, I was fairly sure I did still have quarters there, but I didn't use them anymore.

And what was this about only using the detached palace for naps? That was where I lived and worked. I racked my brains, but no answer revealed itself. I considered asking the maid again…but then I suddenly realized something.

…Huh? Why does this feel so…off-putting?

I was a princess. It was only natural that I should have a room in the royal castle. Maybe I had been asleep for so long that my sense of reality had grown a little hazy?

Still mulling over my thoughts, I arrived in the dining hall. My father and mother were already seated, in the middle of breakfast.

When my mother's eyes met mine, she stood up from her seat and walked toward me. I braced myself—when she reached out to touch my cheek.

"Good morning, sleepyhead."

“Eh…? Ah. G-good morning…?”

“Are you still half asleep? It’s time to wake up.”

My mother’s voice was always gentle. This time, she even gave me a light kiss on the cheek.

I stared back in a daze, when she tilted her head to one side in curiosity.

“Your breakfast is getting cold,” my father said.

“Apologies, Orphans. Come now, shall we have breakfast?”

“Y-yes…”

Prompted by my mother, I took my seat and started nibbling at the meal laid out before me.

We ate in silence. I took this time to observe my parents; there didn’t seem to be anything unusual about them. Though I was supposed to be eating, I quickly got distracted, my hands coming to a standstill.

My mother noticed. “You haven’t eaten much, dear. Are you feeling well?”

“Huh? Ah, n-no! I mean, I’m fine!”

“…Very well. Don’t push yourself too hard, all right?”

“Hmm. You’re indispensable to the realm. And you’re our precious daughter,” my father added with a calm smile.

For some reason, my heart skipped a beat at this. Not quite knowing why I felt so happy to hear that, I took another bite of my breakfast to conceal my embarrassment.

Tea was served after the meal, when my father spoke up once more. “So, how is your plan coming along?”

“My plan…?”

“You said you were going to build magical tools of some sort, based on memories from what you called a past life. Have you forgotten?”

“…What did you just say?” I asked cautiously.

“You were planning to build things based on your memories, right?”

“…I was?”

“Yes,” my mother said matter-of-factly.

My father seemed to be wondering what was so funny.

But I had been thrown into utter confusion. My memories from my past life were an important part of who I was, but I kept them closely guarded. I rarely divulged them to anyone.

My head spun once again. Something was definitely wrong

here…

"They must be coming along smoothly, what with all the help you're getting from Euphyllia and the others," my mother pressed.

"Just don't bury yourself in your work too much. You can let Algard and the others handle things today. Why don't you take some time to get some rest?" my father added.

"…Allie?"

"Yes. Don't worry. He, at least, has his head on straight. You should pay a little more attention to your surroundings, dear," my mother said with a giggle.

The longer this conversation went on, the more uncertain I became.

"…Thank you for the meal. I think I'll go take a walk," I said, rising to my feet.

"Take your time."

"Have a good day."

My mother and my father both flashed me warm smiles as they saw me off.

I all but fled from the room.

After leaving the dining hall, I made my way to the detached palace. Maids, knights, even nobles—it felt like everyone I passed along the way greeted me with a kind smile.

"Good morning, Your Highness."

"Did you sleep in again today, Your Highness?"

"Don't push yourself too hard, Your Highness. You need to remember to take care of yourself."

Feeling increasingly awkward, I hurried my pace and broke into a run once I was outside.

It wasn't long before I spotted a familiar group gathered in the courtyard. Only then did I stop running and approach them normally.

"Oh? Well, if it isn't Her Royal Sluggard?"

"Tilty…"

"You're awake? You could have slept in today, you know?"

"Allie…"

"Laziness isn't good for the body… But neither is pushing yourself too hard."

"Acryl…"

"Why do you keep repeating everyone's names? Are you still in dreamland?" Tilty asked with a light shrug.

“Were you worried about your plans?” Allie asked gently. “Don’t be. None of them will be finished overnight. You need to be patient.”

Acryl seemed to be ignoring me, but I noticed her stealing glimpses every now and then as if to see how I was holding up.

“Thank you… So, er, about the plans…,” I ventured.

“Which one?” Tilty asked. “We’re pretty busy, you realize, what with how you keep coming up with one idea after the next. There’s your automatic car, flying vehicles, and the communication devices.”

“Yes, there’s never a dull moment. They must have had quite the advanced civilization in this world you remember…,” Allie said.

“Have I told you all about my past life…?” I asked cautiously.

“Hmm? More times than I could possibly count,” Tilty answered.

“Since forever,” Allie added.

Acryl shot me a look. “…Are you still asleep?”

The three of them stared back at me as if worried for my health.

I caught my breath, then did my best to relax my expression. “Right, yes… I think I’m a little tired.”

“Keep it together. Without you, this will all fall apart.”

“Yeah. You’ve got to look after your health.”

“…Would you like me to hunt down a meal for you?”

“I’m all right. By the way, um… Where’s Euphie?”

“Euphyllia? Isn’t she in her office in the royal castle?”

“Ah, right. Thanks. I think I’ll go check in on her.”

“All right. It’s all well and good to be concerned for others, but don’t forget to take care of yourself.”

“I know. See you all later, then…”

I said goodbye to the three of them and headed back for the royal castle.

Once they were out of sight, I looked around to make sure that I was alone and leaned heavily against a nearby wall.

…What is going on? Everything is so strange…

My thoughts kept on spinning around and around. None of this made any sense, and the more I thought about it, the hazier everything became.

Allie and the others knew about my past life, but that should have been impossible.

After all, I had only ever shared that information with one other

person.

Besieged by discomfort and anxiety, I ran—and though I rushed through the royal castle as fast as my feet could carry me, no one chastised me. They only called out a few times.

"Watch that you don't trip, Your Highness."

"Are you looking for Queen Euphyllia?"

"Her Majesty is in her office."

I arrived at Euphie's study.

After catching my breath, I knocked on the door. A moment later, a voice summoned me inside.

There, I found Euphie, Lainie, and Ilia poring over bundles of documents. As soon as I entered the room, the three of them were quick to urge me to relax.

"Ah, you're awake. Are you feeling okay?"

"There's no need to push yourself too hard today. It would be a great help to us if you took some time to rest."

"You needn't rush. Just take it easy. How does that sound?"

It was them, with their gentle voices and their kind smiles.

"Um, there's something I wanted to ask you…," I began.

"What might that be?" Euphie replied.

"I… When exactly did I tell you about my memories of my past life?" I asked before pursing my lips.

There were probably more tactful ways to ask that question, but my thoughts were a mess, so I took the direct approach.

But their responses couldn't be simpler.

"When…?"

"Well, you know…"

"Yes."

Then they all spoke in unison.

""""At the very beginning?""""

…Ah. I knew this didn't add up.

All three of them—Euphie, Lainie, Ilia—answered as if they had known everything from the start.

But that was impossible.

It was impossible… And yet, ever since I had woken up…

"…Are you feeling ill?" Ilia asked. "You look a little pale."

"It's nothing…"

“Are you sure?” Lainie insisted. “We’ve all been a little worried about you focusing too much on your work lately…”

The two of them peered into my eyes in worry.

I flashed them a reassuring grin. I didn’t know how else to answer.

“If you’re not feeling well, why don’t you do something to clear your mind?” Euphie casually suggested.

“Clear my mind…?” I repeated.

“Yes. How about we practice some magic?”

…Was this really coming from Euphie?

“Me? Magic…?”

“Yes. After all—you’re the greatest magic user in the whole kingdom.”

The statement left me dizzy. The world seemed to be spinning around me, but I couldn’t allow myself to fall over.

I raised a hand to touch my forehead, only then realizing that I was sweating and that my throat was parched. Come to think of it, I had been feeling this way for a while now…

“What’s wrong? You’re sick, aren’t you?” Euphie asked, reaching out to me with her usual gentle touch.

But I rejected her. “I’m sorry,” I murmured, brushing her away and shuffling backward, an unsteady step followed by another.

The three of them continued to watch me, focusing on nothing else.

“I’m sorry, I…”

Unable to string any more words together, I turned and bolted from Euphie’s office.

I had to leave. I had to go somewhere, *anywhere* that wasn’t here. And so I ran like a madwoman, but every face that I passed called out in cheerful greeting.

“It’s dangerous to run in the hallways, Your Highness.”

“Aren’t you in a hurry. Good luck! Just don’t overdo it.”

“Ha-ha-ha, you’re as tomboyish as ever, Your Highness!”

Running, slipping, pulling away…

At last, I came to an empty courtyard. After catching my breath, I stared down at my hands.

I could use magic? How? I didn’t even know what to do!

I wasn't supposed to know how. I wasn't supposed to be able to use magic. And yet…could I?

"Light…"

A shining mote materialized over my outstretched palm.

There could be no doubt about it. This was magic.

"Impossible."

But I *couldn't* use magic. This was insane, unbelievable.

Why? Unable to trust anything, I rested a hand against a wall.

It was then that I saw my reflection in a nearby window, and I let out a loud gasp.

I couldn't recognize my face.

My hair style, its color, my eyes—everything was a blur.

I didn't know who I was anymore.

Right. No one had called out my name this whole time.

I fell to my knees in distress. I felt like vomiting, but nothing would come up. What *was* this? A nightmare?

"You, over there. You dropped something."

Suddenly, a voice called out to me from behind. Glancing over my shoulder, I spotted a young woman.

With her platinum hair and light green eyes, she was dressed like a well-bred young lady. She was watching me with a thin smile.

…I didn't know her, yet I felt like I should have. A dull pain filled my skull, my vision blurring.

At this rate, I would soon collapse—but something told me that I couldn't afford to black out here.

"…Won't you take it?"

"…Huh?"

"The thing you dropped."

I had dropped something? When? What? I had no idea.

I couldn't even begin to imagine what it might be. After all, I didn't know who or what I was anymore.

The woman merely stared at me, her eyes narrowed

judgmentally.

"…Who are you?" I found myself murmuring.

The girl's smile relaxed, and she grinned.

"Anisphia."

She answered.

The moment I heard that name, something broke inside me.

I mustn't touch her. No matter what, I mustn't touch her.

Something bad would happen if I remembered—but I *had* to remember.

A wave of contradictory emotions bore down on me, threatening to tear me in two.

I should have turned away and willed myself to forget. I should have pretended not to notice. All I had to do was close my eyes and —

"Shut up!" I shouted, trying to reject the voices clamoring in my head.

Without warning, the woman in front of me vanished.

I had to give chase. Alarms were ringing in my mind. I had to find her as soon as I possibly could.

And so I dashed ahead, letting my impulses drive me forward.

"That's quite dangerous, Your Highness."

"Where are you off to, Your Highness?"

"Why are you in such a rush, Your Highness?"

Everywhere I went, people tried to stop me—with good intentions, with kindness, with concern.

I shrugged those voices off. Because no one was actually speaking to *me*.

Why? My name was !

"I know you're watching me!"

That woman was here somewhere. I could feel it.

No matter how far I ran, the scenery around me remained unchanged. I ought to know this place, and yet I didn't recognize it at all.

Everywhere I went, I spotted one contradiction after another—and each time, my headache only got worse. By now, it was so intense that I felt like a stake had been driven into my skull.

I couldn't go any farther. I had to turn back. My body pleaded

with me, but I didn't stop. I had to find that woman. I had to.

At that moment, I glared up overhead. Only the sky was as it should be.

In that case, I had to keep going up. Acting on intuition, I made for the highest point available.

Then, one after another, faces dear to me appeared nearby, all trying to hold me back with their kind words.

"You're up to something again, aren't you? Don't go overboard, you hear?"

My father.

"Running in the corridors? You're royalty! You ought to behave as such."

My mother.

"Sister? I thought I told you to rest. Go back to your room."

Allie.

"What are you doing, you idiot? Come on, I'll take you back."

Tilty.

"There's no need to hurry. Besides, there's something I've been wanting to discuss…"

"Your Highness! I bought some tasty snacks down in the castle town! You want a bite?"

"We found some candies popular with the knights. We can call for tea, if you like?"

"They are delicious. Come, we shall partake together."

Halphys, Garkie, Navre, Acryl.

"Where are you going? Return to your quarters."

"You can't go that way."

Ilia, Lainie.

Each time I shook them off, my heart ached. Still, it happened over and over.

I didn't want to look at their faces and see them contorted with sadness and grief. After all, I was to blame.

My heart had been aching for a while now, like it was bleeding without end.

This was guilt. It was telling me to stop.

Just as I was about to run up the stairs, someone reached out to grab my hand.

"Don't go. Please."

"Euphie…"

Naturally, she was the one who had caught me.

She held on tightly, her gentle warmth flowing through her touch. “Don’t go,” she said, tears streaming down her cheeks. She clung desperately to me.

Ahhh, what was I to do? *Where* did I want to go? Why did I want to leave so badly that I was willing to put everyone through such misery?

Did I really have to keep pressing on?

“You’re okay, aren’t you? It doesn’t matter who you are. Here, we accept everything.”

Euphie’s grip was growing stronger.

At that moment, I understood. I placed my hand above hers, flashing her a smile.

“Maybe you’re right…but that’s why I have to go.”

With that, I shook away the hand belonging to whoever was wearing Euphie’s face.

I was so angry now that I couldn’t take it anymore. My heart was tearing up with sorrow. A seething hatred propelled me forward.

The fear that came over me a moment ago was gone, washed away with my tears.

I had always wanted to hear those words.

There were times when everything was so hard, so painful that I wanted to run away and leave it all behind.

But I could never allow myself to run from that pain. I had made a great many choices during my life, and among them were mistakes that could never be taken back. However, I couldn’t pretend that those failures simply hadn’t happened. They were the result of the choices that I had made. I had to carry those burdens with me.

Even if you take a wrong turn, even if you take the long way around, your life is only ever your own because of the choices you made.

People might laugh at me, they might consider me a fool—but in my heart, I could take pride in my every step.

Because there was someone who had forgiven me.

Someone who had accepted me.

Someone who praised my progress.

That was why I had to keep pressing on. And so I climbed the stairs with no end in sight. My breath grew ragged.

After what seemed like an eternity, a light appeared—and the sky spread out before me.

Yes, behind those many faces, the sky was the only thing that still remained unchanged.

Right. I stared up overhead, and screamed at the top of my lungs:

"Give me back my name!"

Somehow, I was sure that this would reach them.

My name—yes, the name that no one had called me here. The biggest reason why this world felt so strange.

There was no way I would tell everyone about my memories of my past life. I mean—

"I'm Anisphia Wynn Palettia!"

I was a peculiar, out-of-control princess, not at all like how royalty ought to behave.

A heretic unable to wield magic, a reincarnated soul with memories of a past life in another world.

I had hurt so many people with my conceit. Even so, there still remained a tomorrow in which everyone I cared about could laugh together.

There was no way I could doze off in this world of convenience.

"Are you claiming that name? Even though you are an imposter?"

Before I knew it, *I* was standing before me.

That other me looked back with cold, reproachful eyes.

"Despite hurting for so long, you won't allow yourself to relax. Your guilty conscience is holding you back, isn't it?" the other me said, giving voice to the pain in my heart. "But what if they were all gone—those painful, trying memories? You always wanted to be a

normal princess, didn't you? A princess adored by all. All you wanted was to live your life without causing anyone grief."

The other me paused for a moment, breathing a heavy sigh. "You told yourself it was fine if no one accepted you, if no one let you be who you wanted to be, but still you chased after your dreams. That wasn't enough to receive forgiveness, was it? If you want forgiveness, you need to save someone… Isn't that right? But it's hard to live like that, isn't it?"

I couldn't deny it. She was right. That was the wickedness I'd always carry with me. It was the guilt that I had borne all this time.

Yes, I wanted forgiveness, which was why I should be allowed to remain here.

Even today, I still chased after forgiveness.

Maybe I would never be able to erase this sense of guilt.

"But I've gotten this far. And I've gained so much. All because I'm *me*."

* * *

Since my earliest memories, I had already been looking out into the sky, brushing up against fragments of my past life and yearning after magic.

With magic, I believed, I might be able to make my dreams a reality. I had been spellbound.

Everything had brought me to my current path, and I'd learned so much along the way. I'd lived through so many wonderful experiences.

I'd met people I loved, and who loved me, too.

"I'm *me*! The choices I've made are mine! I don't need your permission to be myself! I'm not the imposter! Because I've got everything I need!"

The moment I shouted that to the heavens, the world changed. The sky stretched out in all directions.

This was where it all began; it was the beacon I'd been reaching for. It was the ideal I'd been chasing all this time.

The other me stood ahead. A sudden gale blew in, forcing me to close my eyes. When the wind died down and I could look out again, a shadow had fallen over me from above.

I raised my head and saw a giant tree—as well as an unforgettable figure that left me speechless.

It was beautiful. I could still remember my excitement the first time I saw it.

"The dragon…?!"

"You don't need forgiveness. So you have declared, Traveler. Then your weakness needn't be forgiven, either."

The dragon raised its hand. I turned to run, only to be pinned to the ground.

With the dragon holding me down, I could hardly breathe. It could have crushed me with the slightest effort.

"A-aaahhh! Gah…!"

"Weak. You're weak. Peel it all away, and what's left is weakness. You can't protect anything. You will lose it all. What else lies ahead but loss? What else can you do but drown yourself in idle dreams?"

"I—I…! I'm not drowning in a dream…!"

"It's no use. You cannot escape."

No, I couldn't. The dragon was right about that.

It was literally holding me down, and there was nothing I could do to stop it. More to the point, there was no hope of escaping this dream world.

But at this very instant, the others were desperately fighting Lilana, the enemy of all magic users. I couldn't afford to stay here…!

"You… Aaarrrggghhh!"

"It's no use. You have no power over me here."

The dragon didn't so much as twitch. I tried to reinforce my strength, but my Impressed Seal failed to respond. That did kind of make sense, if the dragon was present right before me…

After all, my powers were only borrowed. Still, if I gave up here, it would all be lost. So I couldn't submit, no matter what…!

"Everything will be so simple, so easy, if you just surrender yourself."

"N-no…!"

"Why not?"

"Because I'm going to stick with the choices I've made, until the very end!"

"Did you truly make the choices you should have? Have you no care for this world you've made?"

"Even if I did, I'd say the same thing!"

"Is this world truly everything you want it to be?"

"What does that matter?! What's the point of *this* world if I'm the only one in it?!"

This was a world of convenience, where every dream, every wish, could be made true. A world without pain or hurt.

But I was completely alone. There was no one here but me. The people I had met were no more than memories. They weren't *real.*

Even if I remained here in this world where my every dream would come true, the people I wanted to share it with were absent.

So many faces flashed through my thoughts—and at the very end was Euphie, calling out my name in that loving voice of hers.

"Anis."

Euphie—she believed in me more than anyone, even giving up her own humanity for my sake.

Only she knew my deepest secret. She was the one I wanted by my side more than anyone else.

What would happen to her if I gave up now? I couldn't let anyone take her away, not when she had chosen her current life for me!

"I'm not alone! So I want to live until the very end, no matter how painful it is!"

I didn't care how pathetic I sounded. I didn't care if I had to bite down on stones or if I was dragged through the mud.

I was determined to keep on fighting until I took it all back.

"Anis! Hang in there, Anis!"

A voice reached me from far afield.

She was crying, desperately pleading.

In my mind's eye, I witnessed a scene somewhere other than where I was.

"Anis! Please, Anis! Lainie! Lainie, come quick!"

It was Euphie, sobbing as she desperately shook me by the shoulders.

"Calm yourself, Lady Euphyllia!"

Lainie, her expression stern, rushed over and rested a hand on Euphie's shoulder.

"Ha-ha-ha! Ha-ha-ha! You're too late! Anis is mine now! Everything is exactly as I intended!" Lilana spread her hands wide as her body shook with laughter.

"You bitch! How dare you do this to her?!" Garkie exclaimed as he rushed in.

Navre threw himself in front of Euphie and Lainie. "Halt! On my honor as a knight, I won't let you come any closer to Princess Anisphia!"

Garkie lashed out with a flame sword, striking Lilana on the arm with a level of lethal force that would have been unimaginable for him before now. Lilana moved to brush him off, but Garkie pressed ahead, closing in and hitting her with a powerful headbutt.

Meanwhile, Navre took full advantage of that opening to unleash a barrage of wind magic at point-blank range, throwing her

off-balance.

With a single click of her tongue, Lilana spawned fresh monsters. The swarm of creatures was about to engulf Garkie and Navre when the knights and adventurers let out a unified battle cry.

Fearless now, they stood up in rage against the monsters.

"Why you…!"

Amid the ensuing melee, it was Acryl who reached Lilana first. "What have you done to Anisphia?!" she howled, her face contorted in anger.

"Why are you so angry?" Lilana shot back. "This has nothing to do with you, Lycant."

"Be silent! I care little for Anisphia—I despise her! But I hate you more! I hate your contempt for human life, for people's rights and freedom!"

Acryl bit down, severing Lilana's arm. Before the falling limb could spawn even more monsters, Garkie lanced it with his burning sword. Then he targeted the young vampire matriarch once again.

They were all shouting in anger and defiance. And all I could do was watch.

"Anis…! Anis…!" Euphie sobbed, clinging to my hands.

"Pull yourself together, Euphyllia!" Allie chastised her, grabbing her by the shoulders and forcing her to look up at him. "This is no time to let yourself go! Crying won't get anyone out of this! We're all done for if you don't snap out of it!"

"…B-but, Anis…"

"But nothing! If you're going to call out to her, at least put everything you've got into it! That's our only real option here!"

…Option? What was he talking about?

"Lainie! Do you remember what I did when I pulled your magicite out of you?"

"Eh? Y-yes!"

"Then can you do the same thing to my sister?"

"To Lady Anis…? But won't it just regenerate…? Ah?! Oh!"

"Exactly. She's transforming into a vampire here. There's no other way to stop it. If we don't do anything, she'll become a vampire soon. The power of the dragon is the only thing that can save her now!"

"…You want her to regenerate the magicite used to make her Impressed Seal?"

"Precisely. The dragon's power will consume the vampire

magicite."

"…But is that really possible?" Lainie murmured, uneasy.

Euphie dropped her gaze, too.

Allie grabbed her by the shoulders once more, forcing her to look back up.

"Can you do it?! No, you *have* to do it! You're a spirit covenantor, Euphyllia! Your magical energy is purer than anyone else's here! To a monster, it's raw sustenance! So pour everything you have into her!"

"But you could say the same thing about the vampire magicite growing inside her, too…"

"It's a gamble! We have to wager that she's stronger than that vampire! It's better than doing nothing, right?! Spirits serve to mirror human will, don't they?! I'm begging you, Euphyllia!"

Euphie lifted her gaze in response to Allie's appeal. Still ridden with anxiety, she glanced down at me—when her expression tightened with renewed strength.

"I understand. I'll give it a try."

"Thanks… Hold your head up high, Euphyllia. You're the only one strong enough to stick by my idiot sister to the very end… Take care of her for me."

That was the last I saw of him in that moment. He flashed her a fearless grin before returning to the battlefield.

After watching him leave, Euphie turned to the task ahead.

"I'm sorry to ask this of you, Lainie, but can you—"

"Of course. I won't let anyone or anything approach."

"…I don't know what will happen. If I fail, she might not be Anis anymore…"

"We won't let that happen," Lainie interrupted forcefully. "I'm staying here, by your side. So don't fret, Lady Euphyllia."

Euphie startled for a brief moment, before relaxing and flashing her the slightest hint of a smile in return.

"And don't second-guess yourself!" Lainie added. "You two have always been there to save each other, so you can save her again now!"

"…Yes, you're right. You've grown, Lainie."

"Yes. I'm strong enough to protect you, at least for a little while."

"…Then this is no time for me to shrink back in fear." Euphie's face relaxed as she flashed Lainie a fleeting smile. "I'm hopeless

without you. Even if you end up killing me, please, come back… Anis."

She held my hands in her own, pressing her forehead up against mine, until finally, our lips pressed against each other.

Through that touch, the breath of life began to pour inside me.

It was Euphie's magical energy—so hot that it seemed to numb the pain at the back of my head.

As that power filled my body, my heart leaped with an excruciating jolt.

"A-aaarrrggghhh! Gaaaggghhh?!"

The sweet tingling that seemed to be melting me away from the inside and the intense pain that wanted to burn me alive both struck simultaneously—and each time, I felt like my consciousness was slipping away.

I was disappearing.

I was melting away.

I was being twisted out of shape.

I was dying.

The pain felt good, even comfortable.

I was being created anew, and that filled me with tremendous joy.

But that happiness was coming against my will, and that filled me with immense fury.

"Don't you…decide…my happiness for me! I—I…!"

This wasn't the happiness that I wanted.

I bit my lip, fighting to resist the poison working to destroy my sense of self.

"Are you still resisting? Even though giving in will make it all go away?"

"Of course I am…! You…! Don't mess around with my heart! It belongs to *me*, and me alone! I'm not going to let you make it all go away!"

"Ahhh. Yes, that's the spirit."

The moment I told the dragon I was refusing to surrender, the pain suddenly eased.

A familiar sensation returned to my back, one that had evaded me in this strange world—and from there, it took root, spreading

throughout my body.

"…No way…"

"You don't need me to explain, do you, Traveler? Yes, you're a curious being."

"…Are you helping me?"

The dragon was eating away at the vampire magicite invading my body.

Or so I thought, yet the dragon responded with a mocking laugh.

"No. Ultimately, this is just a just a dream. There's nothing real about this place. Here, only you exist."

"…Right."

Now that I thought about it, the dragon was the only entity amid all of this that seemed somehow different.

The world Lilana was showing me was supposed to fulfill my every wish and desire. But the dragon stood outside of all that.

One possibility came to mind, though even that may have been a reflection of my own wishes. But of course, I couldn't expect an answer here.

"…You granted my wish. I always wanted to speak with you longer."

"Hmm… There's no need for words between us now."

"You're pretty stingy, you know…?"

"I don't mind humoring you, though, for now. Let me ask you one question: Will you subjugate them? When you leave this peaceful dream behind? Will you go off to new horizons?"

"I will."

"In that case, Traveler—for what do you fight?"

"For a future that's yet to come!"

My heart burned, like a fire had been lit in my chest.

That heat coursed through my entire body, filling me with energy and power.

"Then subjugate, Traveler. You who have consumed me—show me what your future holds!"

The dragon's words were the last thing I remembered as my

consciousness faded into nothing. Ahhh…at long last, I was awakening from the dream.

* * *

I could hear my heart pounding as I came to. The blood surging through my flesh reaffirmed my existence.

It took me a moment to notice the warmth pressing up against me. I knew this feeling well. Opening my eyes to the sight of my beloved, I pressed softly into her embrace.

There was Euphie, her eyes closed in prayer, her lips pressed against mine.

I placed a hand on her cheek, when she quickly pulled away, staring deep into my eyes.

"…That's you, isn't it, Anis?" she asked anxiously.

My smile might have been the most sincere of my life.

"Thank you, Euphie. I made you worry, didn't I? I'm all right now."

“Anis! Anis…! Anis…!” Euphie cried, hugging me as she called out my name.

“I’m sorry I made you worry.”

I wanted to stay this way forever, but time was of the essence. I had to act.

Patting Euphie lightly on the back, I pulled away. For a moment, she seemed reluctant to let go, but she timidly released me.

“Thank you, Euphie. I’m all right now.”

With those words, I retrieved the Celestial and rose to my feet. I could see that everyone was exhausted and wounded.

Struck by guilt at leaving them to fend for themselves, I came to a stop and stared down at our opponent.

“Lilana.”

“…Why? Why won’t you accept me?! You were happy! Everyone *always* accepts me in the end! Why won’t you?!”

Her eyes were wide-open in disbelief. She shook her head as though her deepest-held beliefs had just been utterly betrayed.

Having seen the world she sought to create, my heart reached out to her in sympathy.

“It certainly was a blissful dream,” I said with a nod. “You offered me the world that would result if you took all my painful memories. You create these places where everyone can be happy, pretending that nothing in their lives ever went wrong.”

“…That’s right! So you *do* understand! Then why won’t you accept it?!” Lilana pleaded. “Answer me! Why won’t you accept the utopia I’m trying to create?!”

I looked away, taking a moment to catch my breath before raising my head back up. “If I accepted the dream you offered me, you would take me to a place without pain or suffering. *That’s* why I can’t accept it. Because that’s all you have to offer.”

“…What are you saying?”

“These dream worlds you’ve created have no future. That’s why I reject them.”

“But they *do*! If you accept me, you’ll be happy forever! Who wouldn’t want a future like that?! Doesn’t everyone want to be happy?!”

“But you rob people of the possibility of finding even greater happiness after pulling through hardship. They’re easy—and simple. Trapped in a place like that, you lose all sense of living. Why would we want that?”

“Do you really want to suffer? Do you *want* to risk pain and hurt? You’ll deny my gift even knowing what might lie ahead?! I don’t understand it! I don’t understand *you*!”

“I can’t live in a world filled with nothing but peace.”

“You can’t live without suffering? Are you really happy like that?!” Lilana shrieked, her face contorted in anguish as she flailed. “No matter how happy you are here, death is always just over the horizon! Death brings suffering! Grief! Wrath! Even deep hatred! People put themselves at the mercy of their emotions just to stay alive! They’re supposed to *enjoy* life, but so many end up miserable! Anis! This world is simply *wrong*!” Tears streamed down her face. Her eyes gleamed with desperation.

It was hard to believe that this was the same person who had inspired such an overwhelming sense of fear and dread.

This was simply another facet of the vampire Lilana. Both her monstrous ferocity and her wounded, girlish tears were part of her true self.

“I’m the heir to an entire vampire bloodline! How many other vampires have failed to reach their goals, failed to live up to their dreams before I came along?! All of them failed to understand the truth! But I won’t! This world creates madness! Our existence here is so limited! It forces us all to keep on taking life, to keep on hurting each other!”

“…I can’t deny that.”

“Right?! So you have to understand! If we can’t remake this world to be eternal, without suffering, then people will keep on repeating this miserable cycle! I realized what lies at the end of eternity! Our quest for immortality was all an effort to change the world!”

Lilana stared at me, her gaze a tangled mess of obsession.

“Everyone needs to be reborn! To be like us! To live more beautiful lives! If they would just become one with me, they would be so much better off…!”

She pleaded with me, reaching out with one hand—but I shook my head.

"I'm not saying I don't understand your position…but my thinking isn't compatible with yours."

"Why not?!"

"Because I haven't given up on the world like you have."

"Why not?! Don't tell me you actually believe in spirits?! You have a spirit covenantor right there—you ought to know what they are! You ought to know the truth behind those beliefs, you must know what magic ultimately brings!" Lilana glared across at Euphie, all but denouncing her as an abomination.

I shifted my position to block her line of sight.

"Your spirit covenantors have surrendered everything to this world—their very existence! They're doomed to simply disappear! You don't want to be saved from those…those fakes?!"

"It isn't that simple. I don't believe your dream world is any real salvation. If spirit covenantors have simply given their entire being to the world—well, you're just rejecting the world in its entirety. All you're doing is taking the opposite extreme."

"…You dare say I'm wrong…?"

"…Life is limited—you're right about that. We all have to say goodbye one day. Sometimes those farewells can even seem unfair. Just being alive isn't enough to free yourself from suffering, so I can see why you might think that this way of living doesn't make any sense. But I want to be able to say one day that even the suffering was worth it."

"…How can you both want to live and enjoy suffering?"

"I won't let my life be nothing but pain. Yes, life is limited—that's why I want to live it to the fullest. I want to stand up with pride when the end finally comes. As far as I'm concerned, that's how you overcome suffering."

"That's… Bah! Maybe that will work for you, but it won't be enough for everyone else!"

"I'm not conceited enough to think I can save the entire world myself. I can't even save a single person. But if I can lift even just one other person up, then that's enough to give value to my life." I paused there, placing a hand on my chest. "I think there's more meaning to be found in pushing through suffering than in rejecting the world and everyone in it."

"Meaning in suffering?! *What* meaning?!"

“When we feel pain, we discover the weight of that pain. That’s what gives us the strength to think. Just like how the spirit covenantors of old sought peace, just like how your vampire ancestors sought eternity, the power to resist pain is what propels us into the future.”

That was why I could stand here, head held high, as Anisphia Wynn Palettia.

I had struggled with the fear that I might be wrong, but that was what kept me pushing forward, in the search of something that could prove me right. I wanted to believe in the person I was now, the end result of that long, painful process.

“Suffering can give us the power to create something new. You can’t just deny it outright.”

“But that’s… What about those who *can’t* endure pain, then? Are you telling them all to just grin and bear it?!”

“I’m not saying that. But I’m not other people. If you don’t have the will to overcome your own suffering, you won’t be able to accomplish anything by yourself. If someone is unwilling, there’s nothing I can do for them.”

“Then you’re admitting I’m—”

“All I want is to live happily so that other people looking to be saved can follow in my footsteps. I want to prove that people *can* be happy. I’m not about to give up on this world.”

I couldn’t accept the reality that Lilana wanted to create, because in her world, the kind of life that I wanted to live simply wasn’t possible.

“You don’t have to change the whole world, Lilana. Why not be there just for those who actually want what you offer?”

This time, I extended my hand in her direction. I hoped that she would respond in kind.

Lilana’s eyes widened slightly as she stared back at my outstretched hand.

“Maybe someday, someone will be able to find comfort in a world you can create for them. Maybe it will give them the strength to take their first steps toward the future. That would be a wonderful thing. What do you think? If you’re willing to accept this idea, I think we’ll be able to support each other.”

“…”

“…What you’ve been doing is wrong. But I don’t want to deny you your wish. So can’t we coexist, side by side?”

Lilana's dream worlds could serve not to rewrite reality, but they could be temporary cradles. She just needed to accept that for herself. Because if there was a possibility that we might come to some form of accord, I didn't want to abandon it.

In my own way, I had been touched by her thoughts, by the world she had created.

If I had made one wrong step myself, I might have wanted the same thing she did.

In that scenario, maybe *she* would have been *my* salvation.

Lilana could have been me. With that in mind, I couldn't reject her outright. I could only hope that my thoughts, my words, might get through to her.

"I love magic with all my heart. I really do believe that magic can help people find happiness. That's why I'm able to push on… You feel the same way, don't you, Lilana?"

She hung her head in silence. "…So you love magic, too, Anis." She couldn't bear to pick up her head. "It's because of magic that you love this world so much, isn't it?"

"It is. And I do love it. That's why I'll never give it up," I said softly but with force all the same.

Lilana lifted her face, her eyes wet with tears as she flashed me a faint smile.

"I'm sorry—I mean it. We understand each other so well now… but we still don't see eye to eye."

She paused before continuing. "I know how you feel, Anis. I understand you, because I know what I want. I can't accept a world where people might get hurt or feel unhappy, because I have the power to prevent all that. That's my destiny."

"Even if people don't want the world you're striving for? Do you really have to absorb everyone into it against their will? Is that really your solution?"

"People are weak. They don't know how to respond when faced with too many possibilities."

"…I see. So we won't be able to reach a compromise, will we?"

We exchanged troubled smiles. We both wanted to change the world, yet we stood directly opposed to each other. After all, the worlds we envisioned were irreconcilably at odds.

That conclusion made my heart inexplicably heavy.

"Our meeting like this was fate, Anis. But I wish it hadn't happened this way."

"…Me too, Lilana."

With that, the conversation trailed off. A faint breeze picked up, blowing in from around us.

After a while, Lilana's quiet voice sounded once more. "I have to defeat you, Anis. Here. Today. I won't let you stop me from making my world a reality. If you won't accept me, I'll at least consume you for sustenance."

"I have to stop you, too, Lilana," I responded. "I'm going to have to bring your destiny to an end to protect the world that I care about. I won't let you take it all away."

Lilana's body swelled as more monsters emerged from her back. It wasn't long before, compelled by Lilana's will, they rushed forward in attack.

"Anis!" Euphie cried out in worry.

"It's all right," I called back reassuringly while bracing myself.

Brandishing the Celestial in a wide arc, I cut the oncoming monsters clean in half—the shock spreading all the way to Lilana's arms, tearing them to shreds.

"Huh…?"

She stared down at her limbs while they regenerated.

"Is that…your true power…?!"

"The very power you awakened in me, Lilana."

The magical energy coursing through my body had changed.

The pulsating power that previously had been situated near the base of my back had shifted now to my heart. I understood intuitively that a piece of magicite had formed there.

I would have been lying if I said that I didn't feel a sense of dread at this new upswelling of raw power. If I let this sense of omnipotence get the better of me, I could very well lose my way for real.

My *Aerial System: Dragon Heart* technique was now a *true* dragon heart.

"I guess I've merged completely with the dragon power now…"

"Dragon…? *That's* the source of your power, Anis? No wonder you stole my heart."

"I'm not a pure dragon, just so you know. But this is all thanks to you, I suppose, Lilana."

The dragon power in me rebounded during her attempt to turn me into a vampire, the two energies feeding each other through my Impressed Seal.

With Euphie's help, the dragon energy had won out, and so it was primarily from the dragon magic that the magicite inside my chest had been born.

But within that magicite, I could sense not only dragon magic, but traces of vampire magic, too.

Why do monsters with magicite infused into their flesh seek out other monsters? The reason was surprisingly simple. To grow more powerful. To take more power from other creatures.

As a result, Lilana's attempt to invade my mind and body had given me vampiric qualities as well.

Vampires were capable of absorbing energy through blood and other means. For most, absorbing energy in that way was no easy feat. However, these powers enabled me to easily absorb the dragon magic. It was through Lilana's actions that the two had now come together.

To put it simply, I was now a dragon in human form.

Naturally, I was immensely curious about my new condition, but that could wait. There was a more pressing task that I had to see to first.

"Euphie, stay back with the others," I instructed. "I'm not sure of my own strength here, and I don't want you to get caught up in this."

"But Anis…!"

I looked her square in the eyes. "This time, I need you to trust me."

Euphie stepped back, clearly worried. I flashed her one more smile before turning to face my opponent.

"Let's settle this, Lilana."

"I can see my monsters won't stand a chance against you now. Can you fly? Let's do this in the air," she replied, spreading her two sets of wings and taking off into the sky overhead.

Watching as she ascended, I poured my magical energy into my royal robe and spread my wings.

High in the sky, we faced one another at a distance from everyone on the ground. It was Lilana who made the first move.

Her hand lit up, and with a light wave, countless bullets of raw energy appeared before her, shooting toward me after a short delay.

I swerved to one side to dodge them, but they arced around as if tracking me, forcing me to pull forward in the hope of escaping their range.

But even then, I couldn't shake them off, and so with a backward glance, I extended the Celestial's blade and swept them all away.

"If that's all you've got, you're hardly an opponent!" Lilana exclaimed, approaching from my blind spot and digging her claws into the Celestial.

I swung the blade around to shake her off, and Lilana quickly fell back.

"…All that from one swipe?" she breathed, staring down at her cracked claws as they regenerated. "That power is incredible. No wonder dragons are considered living, breathing calamities."

"I have mixed feelings about it, but you're not wrong!"

This time, I flew straight for her—and at the same time, Lilana swooped down toward me.

In her hands, what looked like a magic sword forged of compressed darkness came into being, colliding hard against my own Celestial.

At that moment, the Celestial's power output suddenly dropped, and I was struck by the feeling that my own magical energy was being sapped out of me.

I parried to separate myself from Lilana, but she quickly chased after me.

When next we exchanged blows, I couldn't fail to notice that her sword of deepest darkness cut through my own magic blade as if corroding it away—and Lilana proceeded to absorb the diverted magical energy.

"…Darkness magic?!" I exclaimed.

"Exactly!" she answered. "Darkness is my number one specialty!"

"A suppression effect…! So that's how you can be so sure of victory, using your opponent's own magic against them…!"

"Correct again…!"

In terms of its effects and attributes, dark magic controlled silence and that which lay at the ends of things. It could be applied in numerous ways to stabilize people's minds and induce sleep, suppress the effects of other magic, and even for concealment.

Lilana had taken it a step further, using it both to erode other

magical attacks and absorb their energy for herself.

In other words, she was combining dark magic with her own vampire abilities. That weapon of hers was effective even against my magical swords, proving that she truly was a mortal enemy as far as magic users were concerned.

“If you’re going to try stealing my magic, how about this?!” My magic sword wasn’t going to win this. I clenched my fist, channeling my dragon power as much as possible.

Her brow twitched as she realized what I was about to do.

“Haaah!”

“—Ngh?!”

My fist dug into her check, sending her backward though the air.

She soon stabilized herself, then forced her head back into a more natural angle with a loud, grinding click.

The sound was so painful that even I winced. I must have snapped her neck. But even then, the injury was quickly rendered as if it had never happened.

“You’re too dangerous to approach, Anis…”

“You’ll just regenerate any damage I deal anyway, right? So why hold back?”

“How frightening! Magic alone isn’t enough for you! No, I think I’ll keep my distance. I really am shaking here! So how about this?!” Lilana cried, raising her hands above her head as she began to formulate another magic technique.

This time, it was a ball of light emitting a blackish-purple glow —but as she poured more energy into it, its form began to change.

…That wasn’t just magic. I was struck by a sense of déjà vu.

The next moment, the ball of light completed its transformation —becoming a winged serpent clad in darkness, curling around its summoner.

“Spirit substantiation, right?” Lilana said. “I’m glad I got to see someone do it in person. It was very informative.”

“…No!”

“Don’t get me wrong. It might look similar, but it’s actually quite different, you know? This is like a crystallized form of my magic, made from parts of me. If I had to give it a name, it’s more like *monster substantiation*.”

So basically, this was like the reverse process by which monsters equipped with magicite were created.

Forging monsters comprised entirely of magic certainly was similar to Euphie's spirit substantiation, but the end result was completely different.

"Devour her, Jörmungandr! Bring my beloved Anis to eternity!"

With that command, the huge serpent—Jörmungandr—opened its maw wide as it attacked.

I fell back to evade, waving the Celestial to fend it off, only for the magical sword to be sapped of power on contact.

"Tch…! It absorbs even more power than that last attack…!"

"That's exactly what I made it to do!" Lilana laughed.

She still hadn't moved. As far as she was concerned, this monstrous serpent was probably checkmate.

All it had to do was come into contact with my royal robe to completely sap its power. I couldn't afford to let that happen, but the serpent stood between me and my real opponent.

"What a pain…!"

I clicked my tongue in frustration as I fought to keep my distance. I was unable to shake it off as we engaged in an endless game of midair cat-and-mouse.

Lilana, meanwhile, continued to unleash more magic attacks to block my path. At the same time, the serpent, with its unpredictable movements, closed in.

"One touch and it's the end for you!" Lilana shouted with glee. "You're cornered!"

Now what could I do? Doing my best to avoid the serpent and its vile curse, I tried to think.

The serpent's main trick was using dark magic to suppress spells in general, then create a tiny hole to suck up the energy. That was how it kept on neutralizing any attacks. That strategy only worked because Lilana was a vampire, effectively making her impervious to all strikes. So long as she was alive, all she had to do was leave a tiny gap in her defenses, and she would have an overwhelming advantage against literally any magic user.

However, her vampire abilities seemed to be ineffective against physically fortifying magic. She might perhaps be capable of disabling them with physical contact, but I wasn't about to let that happen.

As such, I just had to keep fighting until she lost heart—but that wouldn't stop her giant serpent.

As a monster born of magic, the creature was essentially magic

itself. Though similar to the spirits of the natural world, it had been created for one reason alone.

If Euphie's spirit substantiation technique was the ultimate expression of magic, then Lilana's monster substantiation was the ultimate expression of artificial magicite. In any event, I didn't have time to dwell on the situation. If I didn't do something about the snake soon, I would have a hard time getting close to my real opponent.

"You've let down your guard, Anis!"

While I was busy evading the serpent, Lilana took advantage of the distraction to speed toward me, equipped with a dark magic blade.

I pushed back with the Celestial, only for the serpent to lash out in her place. At this rate, I wouldn't be able to fight both of them…!

"How about this, then?! Celestial!"

I poured all my magical energy into the Celestial, triggering the sky-blue blade to shift to crystallize, burning whiter than ever before. When it had expanded to the size of a longsword, I brought it down on the serpent.

The condensed magic contained in the serpent was soon entangled in my crystallized weapon. The creature writhed about in an effort to shatter my blade, but I had filled it with such an abundance of energy that it wasn't about to be easily broken.

"Slash it through!"

The Celestial, which I brought swinging around with all my strength, sliced the serpent clean in half.

Lilana's eyes widened in shock as the snake lost its shape, dissolving into the surrounding darkness.

"What?! Impossible! Do you realize how dense that magic was?!"

"You know what they say: it's all about mastering the basics. The simplest solution is usually the best one!"

Lilana fell back, crossing her arms to shield herself with a harried look.

Too late! I almost cried out as I unleashed an upward diagonal slash.

"G-gah!"

The blow tore through her side and came out the opposite shoulder, sending blood flying around us—and while the wound regenerated quickly enough, her expression remained grim.

I just had to keep on going, I told myself—when she broke out into a broad smile.

She looked to be finding the whole situation somehow amusing—impossibly so.

"Ha! Ha-ha-ha! I don't know why, but I can't stop laughing! I've never had to fight so hard to win before!"

"…Never?"

"I mean, I've never lost *anything*," she answered, her voice light and relaxed. "Even from my earliest memories, I already knew so much because of the knowledge stored in my magicite. Everyone only ever had praise for me. They kept on saying that I would be the greatest of vampires. And sure enough, before I knew it, there wasn't a vampire around that could beat me."

"So you're a boaster, too?"

"All I've ever had to worry about was the future of the world and my own… But now, I can't stop thinking about you," Lilana said with an awkward grin. "…Yes, that's right. You, and your magic, Anis. This feeling of not knowing, of pursuing possibilities, of being excited by the unknown. Like nothing is impossible. That even if we can't accomplish it just yet, all we need is time…"

A thrill coursed through my body at these words.

Lilana continued to show me a calm smile as she patted herself on the chest. "I never thought it might be so fun competing like this…"

"…"

Her words turned soft. "It truly is fun. Yes, for the first time ever, it's like magic is really sparkling."

This was no good. Her words were reviving my own long-cherished thoughts and memories, but I was busy making sure we weren't going to collide midair.

"…! Why?!" I demanded.

"…Anis?"

"Have you been alone all this time, Lilana? Did no one ever see you for you? Did no one bother to properly look? You didn't have anyone to talk to, to learn magic with? Even vampires need friends!"

Lilana broke into a slight scowl. Then, as if in realization, she lowered her voice:

"Yes, you're right… I was always alone. All this time, I just

never realized it."

I felt like screaming at the top of my lungs.

Why? Because if Lilana was alone precisely on account of her incredible magical talent, then she was just like me, alone because I *wasn't* gifted.

It was all so ironic, and sad, and frustrating.

No matter how many lives she absorbed into her own, she would always be alone. No wonder we didn't get along.

Her love was like how a child might adore a treasured pet. Now that I understood how she had become the person she was, I couldn't help being angry.

She didn't have anyone by her side, not in the way that I had Euphie.

She had always been alone, and because of that, she had become this fiend.

I couldn't shake the feeling that if our lives had been different, if we had met under different circumstances, we might have become fast friends.

"I never actually felt lonely," Lilana continued. "But we vampires keep each other too close, like we've all melted together. You never have a moment to ask yourself if you're lonely. Ah. So this is what it means to brush up against other people…"

"…"

"Do you think we might have been friends if we hadn't met like this?"

"It's not too late…"

"…Don't say that if you don't mean it, Anis," Lilana warned me. Her face softened with realization. "I'm glad I met you. Yes, this was definitely fate. It's our destiny. But it's too late. You're thinking the same thing I am, aren't you? *If only we hadn't met like this.* Some people manage to get the fate they want, but many don't. The world isn't fair."

"Lilana…"

"You said the world I'm trying to make has nothing to offer but the past. I'll admit it. That's an undeniable fact. But is that so bad? No! No! You can call me evil if you want—I don't care!"

Her crimson eyes were downcast, her hands clenched tightly at her chest, trembling with emotion.

She's no monster, I thought. Despite it all, some part of her was

human.

"Even if I need to consume the world—to kill it, to bring it all to ruin—I'll destroy this unfairness. I never asked for this! If I erase it all, I can create the world I want for once! A happy world, like an eternal dream! A world where no one has to go through that kind of pain again!"

"…Even though in the end, you'll still be all alone?" I asked softly.

"What more could I ask for than to be last one standing? You've helped me realize what I *really* want, Anis."

"I'm not here to give you ideas…!"

"No, this is our destiny. Yours and mine. You're here to remind me that I can't save the world just by keeping it alive."

"No…! No I'm not…! Giving up on everything isn't the solution!"

"That is why we'll never agree, Anis."

I clenched my jaw so hard that my teeth might break, shaking all over as my rage bubbled up.

Lilana, meanwhile, was wearing a troubled smile. "We're natural enemies, Anis," she said.

"…Me? Your enemy?"

"The way we live, who and what we are, everything. We're opposites. I'm a swarm, taking lives into my own. So long as the heart of the swarm, my body, doesn't die, it doesn't matter how many limbs I lose. I'll regenerate. But you—you're a single, monolithic entity. You've incorporated other lives into your own, condensed all their power into one. Which is why my swarm isn't strong enough to beat you. I can already see how this is going to end. I'll be crushed and defeated."

"…So are you ready to surrender?"

"Why would I do that…? I can't—not if it means leaving the world the way it is."

"Lilana, is it really too late to make your dreams a reality? People are always growing and moving forward. Even if you can't see any hope for your future now, who's to say you won't find some later? All it takes is time. So can't you wait? Belief is just another type of eternity!"

"…Belief? Eternity?"

"That this moment will lead into the next one. Times change. *We* change. But time is never destroyed. We remember it, we break

it into digestible portions, and we carry it with us into the future. So we keep moving forward, along with all the baggage we've accumulated through the years. If you can bring yourself to believe in that, I'm sure you'll find eternity."

Follow your heart, I prayed. *Just once will do.*

"Why not give it a try?"

Lilana closed her eyes, turning her gaze to the ground. After a long moment, she looked back up with a saintly smile. "…You're right. That might be a type of eternity after all."

"In that case—"

"*You* can make that eternity possible, Anis. If you put your energies toward your eternity, then I can safely bet everything on mine."

"Lilana…!"

"Thank you. But I'm sorry. You don't know how happy I am right now. You've shown me that even after being denied, there are still so many possibilities, which is why I can bet everything on my vision of eternity without any worries."

"Why won't you understand?! Give it a chance!"

"I'm shouldering another burden—revenge against the Kingdom of Palettia. The drive to overcome your magic is in my blood."

"You're bringing *that* up now?!" I cried back. "What about what *you* want?!"

"It's part of who I am. My future is competing against yours. I'm willing to gamble it all. Besides, I don't want to let you keep beating me around!"

"…Is that your only reason?!" I had totally lost my composure.

Meanwhile, Lilana's smile was unwavering. How could she remain so calm?!

I wished I couldn't, but I could positively feel her determination —she was willing to die here.

"Is this really what you want?!" I shouted.

"Even if my wish is lost, eternity won't be. You've shown me that. So, Anis—let's give this everything we have! Let's see whose magic will usher in the days to come!" Lilana clasped her hands together in front of her.

She looked as though she could hardly contain her excitement.

"Venerable ancestors! Your quest has reached its end! I will make everyone's momentary joy eternal, by leading them to

peaceful, blissful slumber! Because *that* is the ideal we should all aspire for!"

All at once, from her toes up, Lilana melted into darkness.

It was like her body itself was being transformed into magic. But I couldn't accept what I was witnessing.

"No! Not that kind of magic!"

"Anis…"

"That kind of magic leads to death! I'll never, *ever* accept it…!"

"Anis!"

By now, even her arms were melting into the darkness, leaving only her upper body exposed.

And yet her smile was unwavering. She looked back at me, her gaze filled with compassion and gratitude.

"I'm so happy! I've found a goal only I can fulfill! A dream to make real! The impossible to make possible! Blessed are the people! I'll take you all with me, to reach eternity! I will be the cradle of your joy! I'll consume the world and plunge everyone into blissful dreams! That's *my* answer to life!"

…I knew it in my heart—my words couldn't reach her anymore.

Maybe they had never reached her in the first place. Still, I had to bring myself to try.

"…I wish we hadn't met, Lilana. I'm going to hate you forever now."

We resonated with each other so perfectly that I wanted to envision a future for the both of us.

I was sure of it. This encounter would stay with me forever.

How I wished it could have been different…but I'd always had to meet her like this.

"Let's play this out to the end, Anis! And if we meet again…"

Before she could finish her sentence, the darkness had consumed her.

The next moment, the darkness itself took on a clear outline, morphing until it started resembling a snake. Or rather—

"…A dragon…?"

Beautiful horns, calm red eyes, a white mane swaying in the wind. Lilana's very existence had been irrevocably transformed.

Now she was a dark serpentine dragon that called to mind memories from my past life.

Spreading its wings wide, the creature cried out in the clearest, most melodious of voices:

"_____"

That sound echoed through my mind, like a chord played on some wondrous musical instrument.

I was transfixed as the dragon that Lilana had become sang to the heavens. After a moment, though, I recovered and adopted a defensive posture.

The creature was indeed beautiful, but I could not allow it to exist. Not in this world.

This was no time to be captivated by its beauty. But just before I could launch an attack, something yanked me off my feet.

"Wh-what?!"

The force was so strong that I went flying toward the creature, as if gravity had been turned topsy-turvy.

Meanwhile, the dragon remained stationary, its voice ringing out.

At the same time, the forest began to rustle and move, as if being pulled toward it.

The birds were the first to appear, sucked upward in a large spiral—before sinking into its dark flesh.

"What…?!"

First the birds were taken in, then the other animals that called the forest home, then the region's monsters—all of them floating

through the air, being pulled to the dragon's body, and then being absorbed straight in.

The dragon—who used to be Lilana—kept on singing, spreading its wings wide invitingly. Its voice was so pleasant that I could feel myself losing all will to fight.

Chills shot down my spine as I watched the creatures of the forest allow themselves to be consumed.

"You're really trying to consume the whole world…?!"

"Anis!"

"Euphie!"

All at once, I felt a shock from behind. Euphie had activated her royal robe to catch me.

"Where is everyone?!" I cried. "They didn't get sucked in, did they?!"

"Lainie and Algard have erected a barrier to protect everyone, but this song seems to be weakening the spell's effectiveness. It's only going to be a matter of time…," Euphie said.

I glanced down. Below, everyone was shielding themselves behind a wall of earth, ice, and every other element they could summon up.

For the time being, the barrier was weathering the storm, but I could tell that it was being chipped away like a crumbling sand dune.

"…Anis," Euphie said again, embracing me from behind, her voice weak.

Magic would be useless here, so it was little wonder that Euphie was so discouraged. It wasn't hard to guess why she was so clearly lost for words.

"Anis!" a voice called from below. "Can you hear me?!"

"Allie!"

"It's not too late! You and Euphyllia can still get out of here!" he shouted from behind the barrier, Acryl helping him to keep from falling down.

I'm sure Euphie had meant to say the same thing, but couldn't bring herself to speak the words out loud.

If we stayed here, we would all be consumed.

If that was inevitable, then Euphie and I should at least try to survive. That was the logical conclusion to draw from all this.

"…Anis," Euphie called out, holding on tightly.

…The situation was critical. Nothing good would come if I let

myself remain paralyzed by fear.

I knew what I had to do.

"Allie! You know who I am, don't you?!" I cried out with a laugh.

I sure could laugh in the face of all this, because I knew this situation better than anyone!

"I'm the Kingdom of Palettia's very own Dragon Killer, the one who's already saved the country once before!"

My opponent was a dragon, so there was only one thing to do.

Even if magic didn't reach it, I had to keep on resisting until the very end.

Lilana, I'm the one who denied your eternity, so I'll be the one to bring you down. This is no time for grief or regrets! I'll send you off with the best magic I can muster. You could have been my friend—so let this commemorate our meeting.

"Hold on!" I called to everyone below. "I'll protect you all! Trust me with your lives!"

Allie closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and flashed me a cynical smile, while Acryl opened her mouth wide in a laugh.

"For goodness' sake! If anyone is reckless enough—*stupid* enough—to find a way, it's you, Anis!"

"I'll do it, too!" I called.

"Then go! I'll take care of everyone down here!"

"I'm trusting you both!"

"Of course you are!" Acryl shouted back. "Now hurry up and finish this! And one more thing!"

"What?"

Acryl was on the verge of tears. "Do it for my people, for every life Lilana snatched away! Please, Anisphia!"

I responded with a firm nod, fully aware of the weight of this charge.

"Go, Lady Anis! We'll hold our ground!" Lainie called out.

"At least we'll get to see you hunt a dragon up close!" Garkie joked.

"Not even a situation like this fazes you, Princess Anisphia! May fortune favor you!" Navre added.

The knights assisting in creating the barrier, and the

adventurers supporting them, shouted their support, too, their voices giving me strength.

"Will you join me, Euphie?" I asked. "I know this is crazy, but still."

"…Yes. I'll go anywhere for you. Now and always," she said, taking my hand with a bright smile.

I smiled back at her as I extended the wings of my royal robe.

With both royal robes spread wide, we floated upward and away from Lilana's gravity.

At last, we were free—the clouds parting as the moon's light shone down softly from overhead.

"How are you planning to stop her, Anis…?"

"I have an idea… You trust me with your life, don't you, Euphie?"

"Of course."

"Thank you. Then here goes."

"Eh?"

Before she knew what I was doing, I leaned in and kissed her.

With her lips still pressed to mine, I drew her tongue in and gave it a light bite. Euphie winced, but placed her hands on my shoulders.

With that deep kiss, I absorbed the magical energy from her blood. She closed her tear-filled eyes as I rapidly drained her power.

"…Sorry," I said at last as I pulled back. "That's a little *too much* magic for me."

"…Why didn't you just tell me what you wanted?" Euphie asked with a teary glare as she wiped her mouth.

She seemed somewhat languid after I had taken so much of her strength, but I needed her to hold out a little longer.

"I'll need you to help keep me in the air, Euphie. Worst-case scenario, I could use every last ounce of my own magical energy."

"…What are you going to do?"

"Summon a dragon."

"…What?"

"Using our combined magic—I'll bring back that one we fought. Just like what Lilana did before."

"Huh…?! Y-you can do that…?!"

"Probably. At least I *think* I can."

In short, I was going to reproduce the technique that Lilana had employed to summon her Jörmungandr.

“As a Traveler, I don’t have the power to resonate with spirits. But I can absorb spirits by using magicite and make them follow my will. So it stands to reason that I should be able to make spirits take on the dragon’s form.”

Through my study of vampire magicite, I had discovered their underlying mechanism for using magic. The trick wasn’t resonance, but rather control. Magicite compelled spirits—fragments of the world—to take form, and so the strength of one’s willpower was paramount.

In the dream that Lilana had made for me, I was able to wield magic. That sensation was probably a side effect of the vampirization process.

All the pieces, all the different paths that I had traveled, were now coming together.

“There’s no guarantee it’ll be enough to beat her,” I admitted. “But still, I have to try.”

“You’ll give it your all, won’t you?” Euphie said with a smile and a strong hug.

I might not succeed. Failure was a very real possibility. But if there was even the slightest chance that this might work, I owed it to everyone to try.

Though I was embarking on a path that I would have been terrified to travel alone, someone I trusted was holding my hand the whole way.

“I’ll help, Anis,” Euphie said as she pulled out the Arc-en-Ciel. “If I can channel energy your way from the spirit side, maybe it will increase your power even more.”

If she, a spirit covenantor, could draw on the spirits for assistance, that could only increase our chances.

The only thing left was to give it a shot… Pretty much the usual formula!

“Here goes, Euphie!”

“Yes, Anis!”

I held the Celestial ready while she gripped the Arc-en-Ciel, the two of us laying our blades one on top of the other.

Focusing my mind, I delved deep into the magicite that had been born beside my heart, envisioning in my mind’s eye the great figure of the being that had once challenged me.

It was just as beautiful and formidable as in real life—and its power resided now inside my chest.

Was that dragon in any way inferior to Lilana? No way!

I took a deep breath, a fire lighting in my chest like a fever—so scorching hot that it felt like it might burn me away.

The heat was enough to leave me dizzy, but somewhere beyond that red-hot sensation, I felt like I could hear the dragon laughing, urging me to give it more and more.

"Ugh, ugh, uggghhh!"

"Anis…?!"

It was so hot, so painful, that I couldn't breathe. The dragon's raucous laughter filled my brain, so loud it would have been deafening had it been sounding in the real world, and all I could do was scream back in response.

"Go…! Shut up and take my power, you stupid dragon…!"

The next moment, the heat tearing through my chest changed. No longer did it burn and sear. Now, it was a warm but no less powerful heat, beating in time with my heart.

All at once, I was left depleted of magical energy, my soul squeezed so tight that precious little was left.

My vision turned bright red. If I had been standing on the ground, I would have crashed to my knees.

"A-Anis…!"

No doubt sensing how exhausted I had been rendered, Euphie reached out to grab me—and with that, her own magical energy began to pour into me.

As she experienced the same pain that I had just endured, her face contorted in agony—but even so, she refused to let go.

"Come on, you…!"

"It's… It's too much…!"

Our magical energies were mixing, combining, spiraling, and weaving together until the two lines had become one.

All of a sudden, an image popped into my mind. "Euphie! Raise the Arc-en-Ciel!"

"R-right!"

I lifted the Celestial into the air, with Euphie following suit a moment later.

Something about this scene struck me as familiar. It was just like our public demonstration, the one in which we had presented our royal robes and received the people's blessing.

The combined magical energy converged through the tips of the two weapons—and what emerged was a dazzling, colorless light

extending up into the heavens.

The light soon split into two separate spirals, each circling around to create countless rings.

Those shapes filled the sky, coalescing into a giant sphere. Eventually, the light subsided, shrinking into a single form.

"…The dragon…"

Euphie's murmured voice filled the silence.

With the sun having set, we could only make out its outline.

Strangely enough, the light didn't hurt my eyes. Had it taken on the form of a dragon, or was that a real dragon clothed in light?

Either way, my magic had been given shape. All that remained was to add the finishing touches.

I looked to the black dragon Lilana. She was a mass of steeping darkness.

Next, with a swing of the Celestial, I issued my instructions to her white, glowing counterpart.

"Return it to the light."

The dragon moved in time with my words, rapidly closing in on Lilana, who continued to sing her song, oblivious to the oncoming threat.

Before I knew it, the gravitational pull dragging everything toward her had abated.

Her power had been neutralized. The light shrouding the dragon that I had summoned was potent enough to reduce practically anything to light. If magic was like colored water, this phenomenon was akin to diluting it to render it transparent.

Neutralizing, disabling, nullifying—those were the powers of my dragon.

"_____"

Lilana continued her song, but it had no effect. The dragon that I had summoned was too much for her.

I'm sorry, I felt like murmuring, but I bit my lip before the words could come out. I hadn't been able to accept it, but that dragon that she had become was Lilana's wish made manifest, the ideals that she had dreamed of to the point of sacrificing her own

body.

It was a beautiful wish, and I was tearing it down.

What was this if not my own ego at work? I was in no position to offer any apology. No, I had a responsibility to bear the burden of having denied her.

"I won't forget you. Everything you've inherited ends here. There's no future for you. I won't let you pass this fate onto anyone else… So sleep. Dream your eternal dream."

I fought to keep my voice from shaking, to keep myself from breaking down into tears.

Euphie, in perfect understanding, took my hand.

Encouraged by her warmth, I flashed the dragon a gentle smile.

"Goodbye, Lilana—my friend who could have been."

At this farewell, my dragon turned back to me as if catching its breath. A moment later, it let out a wave of destruction.

The magic that Lilana had given her life to weave was swept away, her dragon singing its song until the very end.

Finally, she faded into nothing, as if little more than an illusion…and the sky turned white as the sun began to rise.

With that, my dragon dissolved into nothingness, leaving a rainbow extending across the dawn sky.

It was an astonishing sight, so mesmerizing that one might forget to blink.

"…You can cry if you need to, Anis," Euphie whispered as she approached.

She was so gentle with me, and I couldn't hold it in any longer. My heart poured itself out. I had to clench my teeth to endure the pain of it all.

Slow, measured breaths. I don't know how long it took me to calm down.

"…I won't cry. I owe it to her to see her off with a smile."

The heat spilling from the corners of my eyes was just my

imagination.

People always said rainbows were bridges between heaven and earth, so I hoped this one would lead Lilana to find peace.

Yes, all I could do was hope.

“Nggghhh… I’m done. I can’t lift another finger…”

“…Me too…”

Euphie and I lay down to watch the sky just as dawn was breaking.

After Lilana disappeared, we landed somewhere nearby to rest our weary bodies.

Now that I had no more strength or magical energy to speak of, lying down really was my only option.

Besides, if we stayed put, Allie and the others would find us soon.

“…Anis?” Euphie said.

“Yeah?” I turned to face her, just in time for her to graze my cheek with her fingers. At her soft touch, I let out a sigh of relief.

“Your eyes…,” Euphie murmured.

“My eyes?” I repeated. “Ah, did the color go strange after Lilana bit me?”

“There’s that, too… For a while, your pupils were vertical, like a dragon’s eyes…”

“No way! Really?”

“They’re back to normal now, though. So don’t worry.”

I lifted a hand to my face, but I wouldn’t be able to see for myself until I had a chance to look in a mirror.

Still—eyes like a dragon. I would have to thoroughly check myself over once I got back. If these eyes gave me some strange ability like vampires, it could be a serious problem.

“What about the rest of you? Do you feel all right?” Euphie asked.

“Hmm… I don’t think so.”

“…?! What’s wrong?!”

“I can’t wait to find out how it’s changed!”

“…Ah, right. Yes, I see.”

“Don’t get mad at me, Euphie! I was just kidding!”

“Who’s angry? I’m just a little heartbroken.”

This casual conversation was like music to my ears, medicine

for my exhausted muscles.

Come to think of it, this whole affair had unfolded like a raging gale, one wave after the next. We had encountered that vampire in Filwach Forest, and after going to report to Euphie, we had learned that other vampires were active on the frontier as well.

Lilana attacked us right as we arrived to investigate. She had almost succeeded in turning me into a vampire, but I had been transformed into a dragon instead. It was only natural that I was exhausted.

"…I'm just glad you're okay," Euphie said in a sweet voice, her fingers interlocking with my own. Her touch was almost ticklish. "When Lilana bit you, when your eyes turned crimson… I really thought I was going to lose you, Anis."

"Ha-ha… You sure were very distraught."

"You remember?"

"It was like I was dreaming. I saw how dire it was over here after she bit me."

"Dreaming… Lilana said something about that, too. What did she show you…?"

"A world where everyone knew I had memories of my past life and took it for granted. I could use magic there, too."

Euphie caught her breath, staring deep into my face. "…What for?"

"Sounds like a happy world, doesn't it? No problems whatsoever."

"…Yes, it does…"

"But it was just a mirage. Like an endless cycle of small conveniences. I couldn't accept that."

"…Why not?" Euphie asked with worry. "It sounds like she showed you a place where all your dreams had come true."

"She did."

"…I'm not sure I could have resisted if she had done the same to me."

"It was sweet, but it was poison. That's all."

"Poison…?"

"Yeah. A gentle poison, slowly eating away at the meaning of life, at your energy to live."

When I thought of Lilana now, I couldn't help but feel a pang of sorrow.

It was like I had crushed her wishes with my own hands and

ended her very life.

"You know what they say, how the dose makes the poison? Just like how Lainie's vampire powers can be used to heal, Lilana could have found a way to do good, but she was alone. Even among her own people, she was all alone. She was let down so many times…"

"Anis…"

"I'm sad that we never managed to truly understand each other, and I think I always will be. But I don't want to forget that she existed, or what she lived for."

That was my responsibility to bear after ending her life.

I denied her the chance to end the world and bring life itself to a joyous close, so the duty was mine to make sure the world kept on turning, that people could live their lives in peace and happiness.

"If I dwell too much on it, though, the dragon will probably laugh at me again," I joked.

"The dragon?" Euphie answered. "Don't tell me that magicite has a will of its own?"

"Maybe I was just imagining things. But even in that dream, it had such an *awful* mean streak!"

"…A mean streak?"

"It really got on my nerves! But I think it gave me the push I needed. I think the dragon's will must live on inside me. That's why it was scolding me and telling me not to give myself a miserable existence."

"Are you sure you'll be all right? It's not going to take over, is it?" Euphie peppered me with anxious questions like a lost child.

She truly was worried about me, I realized.

I forced my tired body upright, and then I fell on her with a deep kiss, as if to say *I'm here*.

Euphie closed her eyes to accept my touch. Lifting my body, I kissed her over and over—on her lips and her face, again and again.

"I'm all right…but it's a little inconvenient, I guess," I answered at last.

"Inconvenient? How so?"

"It's like I'm starved for magical energy now. Maybe we'll have to put together some special meals or something…"

Even now, my body was complaining about a hunger that had nothing to do with food. It had me a little on edge.

"I don't think I'll have to eat raw magicite or anything like that. I really don't want to have to waste good materials…"

"…Bah! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

"Eu-Euphie?"

"Heh… That's just like you, to be more concerned about your materials than your own body," she said, holding back tears of laughter.

She wrapped her arms around me, and her face relaxed into a relieved smile. "I really am glad Lilana didn't take you away from me, Anis."

"It's all right… Lilana and the other vampires, I'm sure they all rushed too fast to their conclusions. That's why they stopped looking forward, why they gave up on the future. All they could think about were their goals."

"What makes you think they rushed ahead?"

"All living creatures die. That's the way of the world. Even with an immortal body, there will always be an end. It doesn't matter if you're a spirit covenantor or a vampire, there's still no avoiding that. I think they realized that. They were more exceptional than most, so they ran too far ahead."

As the old proverb said, one word is enough for the wise. The best of us are often faster to understand than others.

But at the same time, having too many answers can lead to its own ironic consequences.

"What do you think lies at the end of it all, Euphie?" I asked.

"…The end. That's it. No matter how successful you are, everything must come to an end. Just like how we brought the age of spirits to a close."

"Yes. Lilana wanted it to be a gentle end…"

A world without suffering, filled only with joy and happiness. A world without need, without pain.

But that was incredibly selfish of her. Just because vampires were more capable than other people didn't mean that their conclusion was the only one possible.

All the same, all things came to an end one day. I didn't want to hold it against Lilana for wanting it to be a peaceful one.

But now wasn't the time for it. That was why I had fought so hard to reject her future. That was the whole point of our pitched battle.

"We should live in a way that doesn't mean giving up on the future. Without hurrying to conclusions. Moving forward with others, step by step. We might get annoyed and impatient. We

might even want to give up at times. But it's too hard to keep going alone…so I want you to stick by me, Euphie…always."

Now that I had denied Lilana, that was now my mission. I had to make the eternity that I believed in real.

An eternity in which people could connect. In which the past wasn't discarded but led to the present. In which we could trust others to carry it forward into the future.

Generations of people would come and go, old eras would end, and others would keep on pushing forward.

We couldn't forget the teachings of the past, but at the same time, we had to always be aiming to improve.

Passing our hopes and dreams into the future was the foundation of everything.

"So we'll move forward, inheriting the past. That's the kind of person I want to be. If I were alone, I would probably be crushed under the flow of time. I would probably lose myself along the way. So I want you to stand by me and watch over me."

"Anis…"

"I won't leave you behind, Euphie. So please, stay with me—live with me—forever."

Euphie swept me up in a tight hug, her whole body trembling with emotion. The next moment, she raised her head, wrapped her arms around my neck, and kissed me.

We stared into each other's eyes, breathing each other's breath.

Euphie was smiling, but that didn't stop a lone tear from trickling down her cheek. I smiled, too.

"…You really have turned into a dragon, haven't you, Anis?"

"Yeah."

"Did your lifespan increase, too, then…?"

"It did."

"…I see." Euphie pulled me closer. She was still shaking, clearly overcome with emotion. "I was hoping something like this would happen," she said. "Life would be too cruel if I had to keep on going without you."

"I made you worry, huh?"

"If it's what you want, I'll spoil you to your heart's desire, Anis."

"Yes…"

"I don't want to be alone, either. I want to be with you forever…"

“I feel the same way.”

We exchanged soft laughs, pressing our foreheads against each other as we held hands.

We were about to exchange vows that would remain constant for all eternity.

“Will you keep on living with me? Will you spend this unknowable future with me?”

“I will. I’ll stay by your side until I can’t go on anymore, and then we’ll choose our end together.”

We would pass our lives together from now on, hand in hand.

We would never be separated. We would dream the same dream.

“There they are!”

“Lady Anis! Lady Euphyllia!”

“Anis! Euphyllia! You’re all right!”

Our gazes remained interlocked as voices began to sound in the distance.

Acryl was the first to cry out; she must have tracked us down by smell. Next were Lainie and Allie.

A wave of relief washed over Euphie’s face—when I grabbed her, pulling her into a passionate kiss.

She melted into it at first—only to frown with annoyance and push me away.

Naturally. After all, I had just drained more magical energy from her.

“What are you doing?!” she cried, pulling herself away.

“I couldn’t help myself. I mean, Allie and the others are coming to pick us up.”

Euphie wiped her lips with an exasperated groan, fixing me with a glare—an incredibly cute reaction that helped to lift my spirits.

“…Ah. I think I see why you’re always teasing me,” I murmured.

“…Have you forgotten that *I’m* the one showing a little forbearance now, Anis?”

Now I had thrown her own tactics back at her, perhaps taking the joke too far.

I might have a difficult time ahead of me getting her back into a good mood, I thought with a laugh.

Yes. We would do everything in our power to keep on laughing, to keep on living.

Lilana might think this world unfair. She might think it forced upon her. Maybe it *is* a place of inevitable sadness and hatred.

But it won't always be that way. There's no telling what the future holds until it comes.

That's why I can keep trusting in tomorrow.

I'll transform the world with new miracles born of magic.

I'll make sure tomorrow is better than today, alongside all those who matter so much to me.

Hi there, Piero Karasu here. Thank you so much for picking up the sixth volume of *The Magical Revolution of the Reincarnated Princess and the Genius Young Lady*!

This volume was all about the root cause of the annulment of Euphyllia's engagement, the incident that kicked off the whole story —vampire interference.

In comes Lilana, the matriarch of the vampire clan—who to Anis, represents *alternative possibilities*.

What if Anisphia's parents hadn't cherished her? What if she had grown up without a sense of attachment to her country or people? What if she had ended up convincing herself that other people didn't matter?

In another life, perhaps Anisphia might have become like Lilana, a monster prioritizing only her own wishes and dreams.

Then again, I don't think she would have taken such a path. She has many friendly faces by her side, including Euphie, who loves her dearly.

That's why Anis can keep on going where Lilana came to a stop. I pray she never goes down the wrong path, and that no one else decides to take Lilana's approach.

By the time this sixth volume is released, the anime adaptation will have already started airing! I'm so excited about it! I'm sure you're all counting down the days!

I can't wait to see Anis and Euphie and the others brought to life! We'll finally be able to see our heroines in a format other than light novels and manga!

I'd like to express my heartfelt thanks to everyone involved in the series, including the production of the anime!

There has been a lot of discussion about the future of the series, and I'm looking forward to announcing more when the time is right.

The story has just reached a major milestone, but there's still so much more that I want to explore in this world! I hope you'll keep on reading!

With that, it's time to give my pen a break. I look forward to seeing you all again in the next volume.

Piero Karasu

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